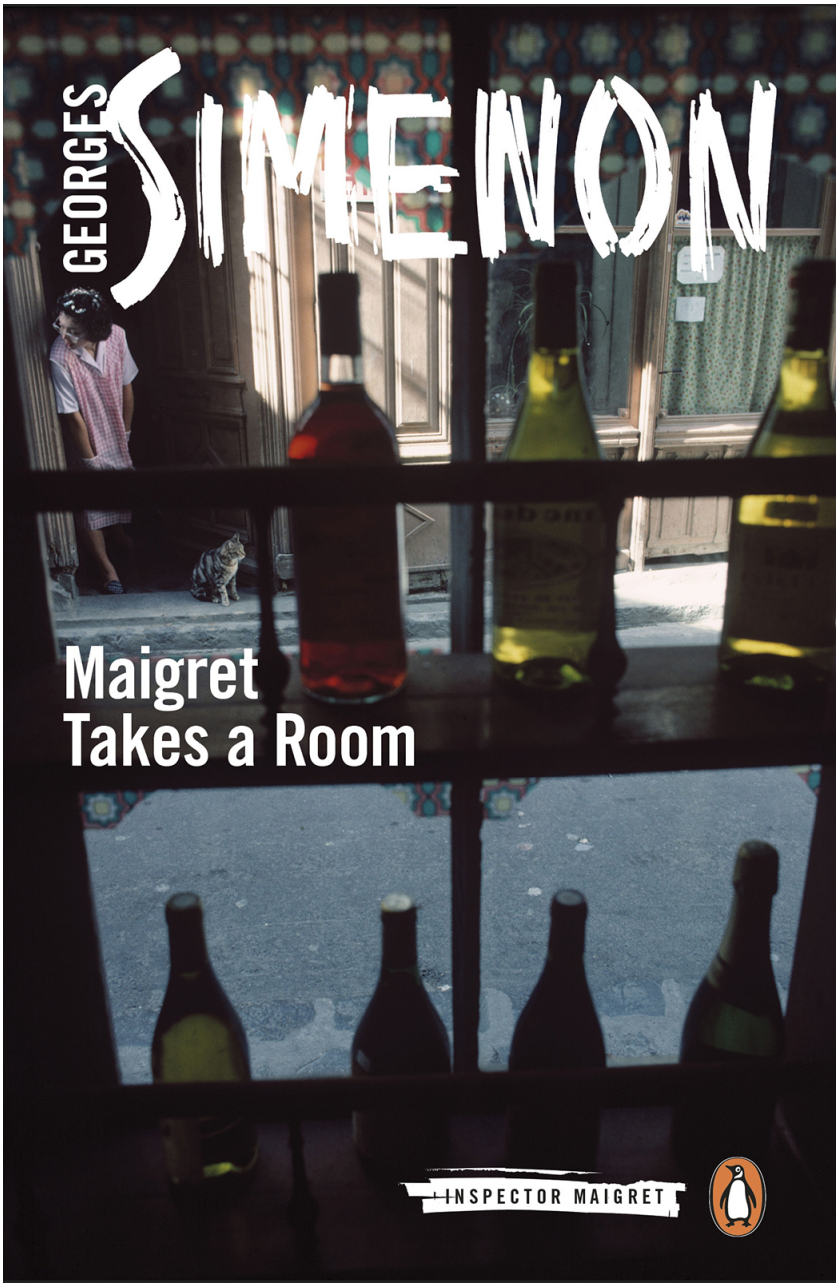
GEORGES
SIMENON
Maigret
Takes a Room
INSPECTOR MAIGRET

Maigret Takes a Room

Georges Simenon

Translated by Shaun Whiteside

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georges Simenon was born on 12 February 1903 in Liège, Belgium, and died in 1989 in Lausanne, Switzerland, where he had lived for the latter part of his life. Between 1931 and 1972 he published seventy-five novels and twenty-eight short stories featuring Inspector Maigret.

Simenon always resisted identifying himself with his famous literary character, but acknowledged that they shared an important characteristic:

> My motto, to the extent that I have one, has been noted often enough, and I've always conformed to it. It's the one I've given to old Maigret, who resembles me in certain points … 'understand and judge not'.

Penguin is publishing the entire series of Maigret novels.

1.

In which Maigret spends an evening as a bachelor and ends up at Cochin hospital

‘Why don’t you come and have dinner at ours, pot luck?’

Good old Lucas had probably added:

‘I can assure you that my wife would be delighted.’

Poor Lucas! It wasn’t true, because his wife, who panicked at the drop of a hat, and who found having a guest for dinner complete torture, would undoubtedly have given him an earful.

They had both left Quai des Orfèvres at about seven o’clock, when the sun was still shining, had made for the Brasserie Dauphine and taken a seat in their regular corner. They had taken a first aperitif staring into space like people who have finished their working day. Then, without realizing that he was doing it, Maigret had tapped his saucer with a coin to call the waiter and ask for the same again.

There are things that aren’t very important, of course. Things that we exaggerate when expressing them, because in fact they are much more subtle than that. And yet Maigret was convinced that Lucas was thinking:

‘It’s because his wife is away that the boss is having a second glass even though he doesn’t have to.’

Two days previously Madame Maigret had been called to Alsace to be by the bedside of her sister, who was about to have an operation.

Did Lucas imagine that he was a bit lost? Or unhappy? In any case, he invited him to dinner, perhaps, out of kindness, a little more insistently than he had intended. He also had a certain way of looking at him, as if he was complaining. Or was all that in the detective chief inspector’s imagination?

As if by some irony of fate, for two days there had been no urgent case to keep him in his office after seven in the evening. He could even have left at six o'clock, when under normal circumstances it was a miracle if he got home in time for a meal.

'No. I'm going to take advantage of the situation to go to the cinema,' he had replied.

And he had said 'take advantage' without meaning to, since it did not reflect his thoughts.

He and Lucas had parted at Châtelet. Lucas had raced down the escalator to the Métro, while Maigret stood in the middle of the pavement, unsure what to do. The sky was pink. The streets looked pink. It was one of the first evenings to feel like spring, and all the pavement cafés were full of people.

What did he fancy eating? Because he was on his own, because he could go anywhere at all, he seriously asked himself that question, thinking about the different restaurants that might be able to tempt him, as if he were about to celebrate. First he took a few steps towards Place de la Concorde, and that made him feel a little guilty, because he was pointlessly going further and further away from home. In the window of a butcher's shop he saw some prepared snails, swimming in parsley butter, which looked as if it had been painted.

His wife didn't like snails. He himself seldom ate them. He decided to have some this evening, to 'take advantage', and he turned on his heels to make towards a restaurant near Bastille, where they are a speciality.

They knew him there.

'Table for one, Monsieur Maigret?'

The waiter looked at him with a hint of surprise, a hint of reproach. On his own he couldn't get a good table, and he was put in a kind of corridor, against a pillar.

The truth is that he hadn't expected anything extraordinary. He hadn't even really wanted to go to the cinema. He didn't know what to do with his big body. And yet he felt vaguely disappointed.

'And what sort of wine would you like?'

He didn't dare to order too good a wine, still not wanting to appear to be taking advantage.

And three-quarters of an hour later, when the street lights had come on in the bluish evening, he found himself standing once again, still on his own, in Place de la Bastille.

It was too early to go to bed. He had had time, at the office, to read the evening paper. He didn't want to start a book that would keep him up part of the night.

He decided to go to the cinema and set off along the Grands Boulevards. Twice he stopped to examine some posters that didn't hold his attention. A woman looked at him insistently, and he almost blushed, because she seemed to have guessed that he was temporarily a bachelor.

Did she also expect him to take advantage? She overtook him and turned round, and the more embarrassed he appeared, the more certain she became that he was a timid client. She murmured a few words to him as she passed, and he had to cross pavements to get rid of her.

As far as the cinema. He felt a little guilty at the thought of going in on his own. Or ridiculous at any rate. He went into a bar and had a calvados. There too, a woman smiled at him invitingly.

He had leaned against thousands of bars and never had that sensation before.

To get some peace, he finally chose a small basement cinema showing nothing but newsreels.

At 10.30 he was still wandering about outside. He stopped at the same bar, had another calvados, as if he was already creating a tradition, and then, stuffing his pipe, he headed slowly towards Boulevard Richard-Lenoir.

All evening, in short, he had had a sense of being in the wrong place and even though he hadn't done anything reprehensible, he felt something like remorse in a corner of his conscience.

He took his key from his pocket as he climbed the stairs. There was no light under the door, no smell of cooking to welcome him home. He had to turn on the switches himself. Passing by the sideboard, he decided to pour himself a drink, which he could do today without exchanging a glance with his wife.

He started to undress without drawing the curtains. He walked to the window and was taking off his braces when the phone rang.

He was sure at that very moment that an unpleasant event explained his unease during the evening.

'Hello …!'

His sister-in-law wasn't dead, because it wasn't his wife speaking, and the call came from Paris.

'Is that you, chief?'

So it was the Police Judiciaire. He recognized the loud voice of Torrence, which, on the phone, rang out like a bugle.

'I'm glad you're home. I've rung you four times. I called Lucas, who told me you were at the cinema. But I didn't know which one …'

Torrence, overwhelmed, seemed not to know where to start.

'It's about Janvier …'

Maigret unconsciously adopted his gruff voice to ask:

'What does Janvier want?'

'He's just been taken to Cochin hospital. He took a bullet right in the chest.'

'What are you saying?'

'He must have gone under the knife by now.'

'Where are you?'

'At Quai des Orfèvres. Someone has to stay here. I did what needed to be done on Rue Lhomond. Lucas jumped in a taxi to go to the Cochin. I told Madame Janvier too, so she should have got there by now.'

'I'm on my way.'

He was going to hang up, already putting on his braces with one hand, when it occurred to him to ask:

'Was it Paulus?'

'No one knows. Janvier was on his own in the street. He had gone on night duty at seven. Young Lapointe was supposed to take over at seven in the morning.'

'Did you send some men into the house?'

'They're still there. They're keeping me up to date on the phone. They haven't found anything.'

Maigret had to walk to Boulevard Voltaire to catch a taxi. Rue Saint-Jacques was almost deserted, with only the lights from a few bistros. He hurried through the entrance of the Cochin and received something like a whiff of all the hospitals he had ever known in his life.

Why surround the sick, the injured, people you are trying to keep alive and those who are about to die with such a bleak and lugubrious atmosphere? Why that light, at once weak and cruel, which exists only there and in certain administrative offices? And why, at the door, are you welcomed by people with surly expressions?

He almost expected someone to ask him for his ID. The ward

intern looked like a child, and wore his white cap at an angle out of bravado.

'Building C. We'll take you there …'

He was seething with impatience. Furious with everyone, he was now angry with the nurse who was guiding him for having lipstick and wavy hair.

Some badly lit courtyards, some staircases, a long corridor and, at the end of that corridor, three silhouettes. The way there, between him and those silhouettes, seemed interminable, the parquet smoother than anywhere else.

Little Lucas took a few steps towards him with the oblique gait of a beaten dog.

'They think he'll pull through,' he said immediately, with his head lowered. 'He's been in the operating theatre for three-quarters of an hour.'

Madame Janvier, eyes red and hat plonked awkwardly on her head, looked at him pleadingly, as if he could do something, and suddenly she stuffed a handkerchief to her mouth and burst into tears.

He didn't know the third person, who had a long moustache and stood discreetly apart.

'He's a neighbour,' Lucas explained. 'Madame Janvier couldn't leave the children on their own; she called a neighbour, whose husband agreed to come with her.'

The man, who had heard the conversation, gave a wave of his hand and smiled at Lucas to thank him.

'What does the surgeon say?'

They were outside the door of the operating theatre and talking in a low voice. At the other end of the corridor nurses, all carrying something, were ceaselessly coming and going, like ants.

'The bullet missed his heart, but it's lodged in his right lung.'

'Did Janvier say anything?'

'No. By the time the Police Emergency vehicle got to Rue Lhomond, Janvier had lost consciousness.'

'Do you think they'll save him, detective chief inspector?' asked Madame Janvier, who was visibly pregnant and had freckles under her eyes.

'There's no reason why he shouldn't pull through.'

'You see, I was right to sleep badly every time he spent the night out of the house!'

They lived in the suburbs, in a detached house that Janvier had had built three years before, because it is hard to bring up children in a Paris apartment. He was very proud of his garden.

They exchanged a few disjointed phrases, glancing anxiously at the door, which still hadn't opened. Maigret had taken his pipe from his pocket, then put it back, remembering that smoking was forbidden. He was missing it. He had to go down to the courtyard to take a few puffs.

He didn't want to ask Lucas what had happened, in front of Madame Janvier. He couldn't leave them either. Apart from Lucas – his right-hand man – Janvier had always been his favourite inspector. He had had him with him as a very young man, as Lapointe was now, and he still sometimes called him young Janvier.

At last the door opened. But it was only a red-haired nurse who hurried towards another door without looking at them and came back in the opposite direction holding an object that they couldn't identify. They hadn't been able to stop her as she passed and ask her how the operation was going, but all four had looked at her face and all four had been disappointed to be able to read in it nothing but professional diligence.

'I think that if anything bad were to happen to him I would die too,' said Madame Janvier who, although she had a chair at her disposal, remained standing as they did, shaking, for fear that she might miss a second by getting up just now, when the door finally opened.

There was a great deal of noise. The two wings of the door parted. A stretcher could be seen. Maigret took Madame Janvier's arm to stop her from running forwards. He was scared for a moment because, from his perspective, it had looked as if Janvier's face was covered by a blanket.

But when the gurney came level with them, he saw that it wasn't the case.

'Albert …' his wife cried, suppressing a sob.

'Shh …' said the surgeon who was taking his rubber gloves off as he arrived.

Janvier's eyes were open, and he must have recognized them, because he had a vague smile on his lips.

He was taken towards one of the rooms, and his wife followed with Lucas and the neighbour, while Maigret, in a window niche, talked to the doctor.

‘Will he live?’

‘There’s no reason why he shouldn’t. It will be a long convalescence, as wounds to the lung always are, and there will be precautions to be taken, but he is almost completely out of danger.’

‘Have you removed the bullet?’

The surgeon went back into the operating theatre for a moment and came back with a bit of blood-stained cotton wool containing a piece of lead.

‘I’ll take it,’ said Maigret. ‘I’ll send you a receipt for it a little later. He hasn’t spoken?’

‘No. He babbled a few words under anaesthetic, but it was vague, and I was too busy to pay attention.’

‘When might I be able to question him?’

‘When he’s recovered from the shock, tomorrow, probably about midday. Is that his wife? Tell her not to worry. Not to try and see him before tomorrow. According to the instructions we received, we’ve given him a private room and a nurse. Excuse me, but I’m operating at seven o’clock in the morning.’

Madame Janvier insisted on seeing her husband on his bed, and they were made to wait in a corridor until he was settled in it, then they were allowed to look in on him quickly.

In a low voice, Madame Janvier said goodbye to the nurse, who seemed to be in her fifties and looked like a man in drag.

Outside, they didn’t know what to do. There was no taxi in sight.

‘I promise you,’ Maigret said, ‘that everything is fine, that the doctor isn’t at all worried. Come at around midday tomorrow, not before. I’ll be receiving regular updates and will phone them through to you. Think about the children …’

They had to walk to Rue Gay-Lussac to find a car, and the man with the moustache managed to take Maigret aside.

‘Don’t worry about her. You can count on my wife and me.’

It was only when he was alone with Lucas on the pavement that Maigret wondered whether Madame Janvier had any cash to hand. It was the end of the month. He didn’t want to see her making the journey every day by train and Métro. Taxis are expensive. He would deal with it tomorrow.

Turning to Lucas at last, he lit the pipe that he had been holding in his hand for a while and asked him:

‘What do you think?’

They were just around the corner from Rue Lhomond and

heading towards Mademoiselle Clément's boarding house.

The street, deserted at this time of day, was looking its most provincial, with its one- or two-storey houses squashed between tall apartment buildings. Mademoiselle Clément's house was one of those, with a flight of three steps, flanked by a sign which announced:

Furnished rooms by the month.

Two policemen from the Fifth Arrondissement, who were chatting near the door, greeted Maigret.

There was light above the door as well as in the windows on the right and on the second floor. Maigret didn't need to ring. Someone must have been watching them, because the door opened. Inspector Vacher looked quizzically at Maigret.

'He's going to pull through,' he said.

And a woman's voice, from the room on the right, exclaimed:

'What did I tell you?'

It was a funny voice, at once childish and joyful. A very tall, very fat woman, framed in the doorway, held out her hand warmly and said:

'I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Monsieur Maigret.'

She was like an enormous baby, with pink flesh, an undefined figure, big blue eyes, very blonde hair and a dress the colour of a sweet. Seeing her, one would have thought that nothing tragic had happened, that all was for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

The room where she welcomed them was a snug sitting room where there were three liqueur glasses on the table.

'I'm Mademoiselle Clément. I have managed to send my tenants to bed. But, of course, I can call them down when you like. So, your inspector isn't dead?'

'The bullet pierced his right lung.'

'Nowadays surgeons can repair these things in the wink of an eye.'

Maigret was rather thunderstruck. For one thing, he had imagined the house and its owner quite differently. The two inspectors, Vauquelin and Vacher, whom Torrence had sent to the property when news of the attack came in, seemed to be enjoying his surprise: Vauquelin, more forward than Vacher, even winked at him, pointing at the fat woman.

She must have been about forty or forty-five but in appearance

she was ageless. Just as, in spite of her impressive volume, she was weightless. And there was so much exuberance in her that in spite of the circumstances you half expected to see her explode into jolly laughter.

It was a case that Maigret had barely been personally involved in. He hadn't come to the property. He had worked on papers, from his office, leaving the responsibility for the operation to Janvier, who had been delighted.

No one at headquarters would have imagined that this case, which was called the 'Stork affair', presented the slightest danger.

Five days earlier, at about 2.30 in the morning, two men had gone into a little nightclub on Rue Campagne-Première, in Montparnasse, the Stork, when it was about to close.

They were wearing black face masks, and one of them was carrying a revolver.

At that moment there was no one left in the club but the boss, a young man called Angelo and the lavatory attendant, who was busy putting her hat on in front of a mirror.

'The till!' one of the masked men had ordered.

The manager had put up no resistance. He had put the evening's takings on the bar and, a few moments later, the robbers had left in a dark-coloured car.

The next day it was Maigret who had interviewed the lavatory attendant, who was plump and well preserved.

'Are you sure you recognized him?'

'I didn't see his face, if that's what you mean. But I did see a thread on his trousers and I recognized the fabric.'

A stupid detail, in fact. Two hours before the robbery, one of the customers at the bar had gone to the lavatory to wash his hands and comb his hair.

'You know how it is. Sometimes you look at a particular spot without knowing why. Well, as I held out his towel to him, I was staring at a bit of white thread on his trousers, near the knee on the right-hand side. The thread was about ten centimetres long and formed a kind of design. I even remember thinking that it looked like a profile.'

She had almost taken it off, and the only reason she hadn't was that the young man had gone out at that moment.

Because he was a young man. A kid, she said. She had seen him at the bar several times, lately. One evening he'd met a girl who

was a regular at the Stork and had taken her there.

'Will you take care of it, Janvier?'

Three hours later, not more, one of the robbers was identified. Janvier had only needed to find the girl, one Lucette, who was staying in a local hotel.

'He spent the whole night with me.'

'At his place?'

'No, here. He was surprised to learn that I'm from Limoges because he's originally from there too, and his parents still live there. His name is Paulus. I thought he was barely eighteen, but he's nineteen and a half.'

It might have taken longer if Janvier hadn't looked in the tenant registry and found the name of Émile Paulus, from Limoges, recorded for four months in a furnished room on Rue Lhomond.

At Mademoiselle Clément's house.

'Do you want to give me a warrant, chief?'

Janvier had brought someone with him. It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, Maigret remembered, and the sun was shining. He had come back two hours later and had put an envelope containing some banknotes as well as a toy gun and a piece of black cloth down on the inspector's desk.

'It's Paulus.'

'Does the amount match?'

'No. There's only half. The rogues must have shared. But among them there are three dollar bills. I went and questioned the manager of the Stork, who confirmed to me that an American had paid in dollars that night.'

'Paulus?'

'His bed was unmade, but he wasn't in his room. Mademoiselle Clément, the landlady, hadn't seen him coming out and assumes that he must have left the house at about ten o'clock in the morning as usual.'

'Have you left someone down there?'

'Yes. We're going to set a trap.'

The surveillance only lasted four days and led nowhere. Maigret paid it no attention; he saw on the report the name of the inspector in charge and, regularly, the phrase 'nothing to report'.

The press had said nothing about the police discovery. Paulus hadn't taken any luggage with him, and it seemed likely that he would come back to look for the little fortune stashed away in his

suitcase.

'Did you take part in the stakeout, Vacher?'

'Twice.'

'How did that go?'

'I think that on the first day Janvier stayed in the house, up there, waiting for Paulus in his room.'

He glanced at fat Mademoiselle Clément.

'He must have been suspicious. The kid must have been warned before he went up the stairs.'

'So?'

'We went outside. I didn't get the chance to do the night-time stakeout. By day, it was easy and pleasant. There's a little bistro a little way away, opposite, with two tables on the terrace. They serve food there and, my goodness, the cooking isn't bad at all.'

'Was the house searched on the first day?'

It was Mademoiselle Clément who replied, joyfully, as if it was a pleasant adventure.

'From basement to attic, Monsieur Maigret. I should add that Monsieur Janvier came back to see me at least ten times. Something bothered him, I don't know what. He spent hours up there, pacing the bedroom. Other times he came to sit here and chat to me. Now he knows the stories of all my tenants.'

'What happened this evening exactly? Did you know he was outside?'

'I didn't know it was him, but I knew that a policeman was mounting guard.'

'Did you get a chance to see him?'

'I glanced out at about nine thirty, before going to bed. I saw someone pacing back and forth on the pavement, but the streetlight is too far away for me to have recognized the silhouette. I went back to my bedroom.'

'Is it upstairs?'

'No. On the ground floor. It looks out on to the courtyard. I started undressing and I was about to take my stockings off when I heard Mademoiselle Blanche running downstairs shouting I don't know what. She opened my door without knocking.'

'Was she dressed?'

'In a dressing gown. Why? When she doesn't go out, she spends her evenings reading in her bed. She's a good girl. Her room is on the first floor, beside the Lotards, and looks out on to the street. She

heard a gunshot, leaped out of bed and went to look out of the window. At first she didn't notice anything. She did think she saw someone running, but she isn't sure.'

'We questioned her,' Vauquelin said. 'She isn't sure at all.'

'Apparently some windows were open. A woman opposite pointed out something on the pavement, on our pavement, and Mademoiselle Blanche made out a body lying on the ground.'

'What did you do?'

'I put on my dress, I hurried into the corridor, where there's a telephone on the wall, and I called the police. Monsieur Valentin came out of his room, and I wanted to stop him opening the door. He did it anyway, and I think he was the first one to go over to the body. He's a charming man, a real man of the world, you'll see.'

Mademoiselle Blanche was a good girl, Monsieur Valentin was charming. The Lotards were doubtless perfect people. Mademoiselle Clément smiled on life, on men, on women, on Maigret.

'Will you have a little glass of liqueur?'

The glasses contained chartreuse, and she tasted hers greedily.

'How do your tenants get into the house at night? Do they have a key?'

'No, they ring the bell. I have a cord by the head of my bed, like concierges do, as well as an electric switch that controls the light in the corridor and on the stairs.'

'Do they call out their names?'

'They don't need to. Before opening the door to them I light up the corridor. My room is at the end. It's an old house, oddly built. It's funny. I only have to lean out of bed and I can see who's coming in and who's going out through a little pane of glass.'

'Do they have to wake you up to leave as well?'

'Of course.'

'And during the day?'

'The door stays open. But there's another spyhole in the kitchen, and no one can pass by without my knowledge. I'll show it to you.'

She promised that as she might have promised him a picnic.

'Do you have lots of tenants?'

'Nine. I mean that I have nine rooms that I let out. In fact, with Monsieur Paulus, it comes to eleven people, because I have two couples, one on the first floor and another on the second.'

'Had everyone come back when the attack took place?'

'No. Monsieur Lotard had gone out and came back a quarter of an

hour later, when the police were already here. Mademoiselle Isabelle wasn't in her room either. She came back just before midnight. Those gentlemen questioned her like the rest. Everyone understood that they didn't need to take it personally. They're very respectable people, you'll see …'

It was nearly two o'clock in the morning.

'Would you mind if I made a call?'

'I'll show you the phone.'

It was in the corridor, under the stairs. Maigret discovered the two little windows to which Mademoiselle Clément had referred and which allowed her to keep an eye on her tenants, either from the kitchen or from her bedroom.

He dialled the number of the hospital, and his eye fell on a kind of money-box attached to the wall. Above the money-box, in nice round letters, it said:

> Tenants are requested to put a franc here for each local call.
> For regional and intercity, please speak to Mademoiselle Clément. Thank you.

'Does anyone cheat?' he asked with a smile.

'Sometimes. I can see them through the spyhole. They aren't always the ones you would think. Monsieur Paulus, for example, never failed to put his coin in the money-box.'

'Hello! Cochin hospital?'

He was put through to at least four different services, all with sleepy or hurried voices, to find out at last that Janvier had plunged into a deep sleep and that his temperature was satisfactory.

Then he called Juvisy to pass on the news to Madame Janvier, who spoke in a low voice for fear of waking the children.

'Your inspector told me that this time he was expecting a daughter,' said Mademoiselle Clément when he had hung up. 'The two of us talked a lot. He's such a likeable man!'

2.

In which Maigret in turn becomes one of Mademoiselle Clément's 'charming' tenants, and in which he makes a number of acquaintances

There was a wider space, at the start of the huge corridor, near the staircase, where two benches which looked like school benches had been placed.

It was there, at midday, just as the sound of bells ringing echoed all around the hospital – with a convent bell somewhere in the courtyards – that Maigret found Madame Janvier, who had been there for almost half an hour.

She was weary. But she did smile at him to show him that she was trying to be strong. On all the floors there was a commotion that sounded like an army barracks, probably the nurses changing shift. They saw them passing by, laughing and jostling one another.

The sun sparkled, and some of the gusts of wind were almost warm. Maigret had no raincoat: he wasn't yet used to it.

'Apparently they're going to come and get us in a few minutes,' said Madame Janvier.

She added with a hint of irony, of bitterness:

'They've given him a bit of a wash.'

Because here she wasn't allowed to be present when her husband was being washed. It sometimes happened that Madame Janvier came to collect her husband from Quai des Orfèvres. Maigret would meet her from time to time. For the first time, however, he realized that she was almost faded as a woman. Barely ten years before, nine years exactly, in fact, Janvier had introduced him to a fiancée with full cheeks that dimpled when she laughed, and now she had that neutral look, that overly serious expression you see on women in the suburbs, their backs aching, busying themselves with their housework.

‘Tell me honestly, detective chief inspector, do you think they targeted him personally?’

He could understand her train of thought and reflected before answering, even though he had already considered the same idea that morning.

Obviously, when Janvier had been shot on Rue Lhomond, everyone had immediately thought of Paulus. And yet, as Maigret had said to the commissioner of the Police Judiciaire when the report was issued, this hypothesis seemed less likely the more one thought about it.

‘That kid isn’t a killer, chief. I’ve been able to get some information about him. When he arrived in Paris, a year and a half ago, he worked for an estate agency on Boulevard Saint-Denis.’

He had gone there. The offices, on the mezzanine, were dirty, and vulgar, like the manager, who had the look of a con man.

On the walls, small handwritten posters were pinned up with drawing pins, announcing the various commercial properties for sale, particularly cafés and bars. It was Paulus’ task to write out the posters in longhand, and also to send out hundreds of circulars.

Another scrawny youth, with long hair, was working in the waiting room, which had to be lit all day.

‘Paulus?’ said the manager, who had a strong rural accent. ‘I kicked him out.’

‘Why?’

‘Because every day he pocketed a few francs out of petty cash.’

This was a drawer which always contained some money, not very much, for small daily expenses, stamps, recorded delivery letters, telegrams and the like.

‘It’s been six months, chief,’ Maigret went on, ‘since Paulus left this job. His parents sent him a little money, but not enough to live on, because they aren’t rich. He ended up selling encyclopedias door to door. I found his briefcase, which contained a copy, as well as some contracts to be signed for the purchase of twenty-two or twenty-four volumes on the instalment plan.’

They continued with the inquiry, of course. Paris smelled of springtime. The buds on the chestnut trees burst into tiny, pale green leaves. Thousands of young people like Paulus and his successor walked the streets of Paris with fierce expressions on their faces, looking for a job, for a future.

‘He must have met a boy who was older than him, and probably

wiser about the world. Mademoiselle Clément says that he received a friend here from time to time, and that on at least two occasions that friend slept in Paulus' room. He's dark-haired, about twenty-five. We'll find him. What strikes me most is that to rob the Stork he should have used a child's revolver. Scaring the manager of a nightclub with a toy and shooting a police inspector in the street in cold blood are two very different things.'

'You don't think, Maigret, that his friend might have pulled the trigger?'

'What would have been the point? There were really only two reasons to kill Janvier: to go into the house to collect the loot, which was risky, or to clear the way in order to get out. And yet Mademoiselle Clément is quite categorical. No one went in or out.'

'Unless Janvier found an important clue and …'

Maigret had thought about it all day while Vauquelin kept watch in the house on Rue Lhomond, where Mademoiselle Clément had seated him in the sitting room, near the open window.

He had even gone through Janvier's personal desk, drawing up a list of all the cases that the inspector had been involved in over the last few months.

He hadn't found anything.

'We'll find out soon enough if he has any ideas!' he had sighed.

Madame Janvier tapped nervously on her handbag, and probably because she felt she was too pale she had put twice as much rouge on her cheeks as she needed, clumsily, which made her look as if she had a fever.

Someone came to get them. The nurse, before bringing them into the room, gave them her instruction.

'You mustn't stay for more than a few minutes. Don't tire him. Don't talk to him about things that might upset him.'

It was the first time that Maigret had seen his inspector in a bed and he found him quite changed, not least because the baby-faced Janvier, who was normally close-shaven, his skin pink and taut, was now sporting a growth of stubble.

The nurse also delivered a little speech to him.

'Don't forget what the doctor told you. You are expressly forbidden to speak. If the detective chief inspector has any questions to ask you, answer yes or no by batting your eyelids. Don't get agitated. Don't get annoyed.'

She added, walking towards a little table where there was also a

newspaper:

'In any case, I'll be staying here.'

And she seated herself on a chair.

Maigret stood near the door, so that Janvier couldn't yet see him. Madame Janvier, who had come towards the foot of the bed, her hands gripping her bag, looked at her husband with a shy smile and murmured:

'Don't worry, Albert. It's all fine. Everyone has been very nice to me, and the children are well. You haven't suffered too much?'

It was quite touching to see two big tears suddenly welling up in the eyes of the wounded man, who was staring at his wife as if he had never expected to see her again.

'Whatever you do, don't worry about us. Maigret is here …'

Had she noticed that, once his initial excitement had passed, Janvier was looking around for someone? It was almost embarrassing. Janvier was a family man, certainly, he adored his wife and his children. Maigret also had the impression that he felt more than anything a part of the Police Judiciaire.

He took two steps forwards, and, seeing him, Janvier's face sprang to life, he wanted to speak even though he had been told not to. Maigret had to gesture to him to be quiet.

'Stay calm, son. Let me tell you first of all how happy we all are that you've pulled through. The chief asked me to pass on his compliments and his best wishes. He will come himself as soon as the visits stop tiring you.'

Madame Janvier had discreetly taken a step back.

'The doctor has only allowed us a few minutes. I've taken over the case. Are you strong enough for me to ask you some questions? You heard the nurse: reply by batting your eyelids. Don't try to talk.'

A wide beam of light crossed the room, vibrant with a fine dust, as if the intimate life of the air were being revealed.

'Did you see who shot you?'

Janvier, without hesitation, shook his head.

'You were picked up on the pavement on the right, the pavement of Mademoiselle Clément, right in front of her house. You don't seem to have had time to drag yourself along before you were found. The street was deserted, wasn't it?'

His eyelids beat.

'Were you pacing up and down?'

His eyelids beat once more.

'You didn't hear anyone coming.'

A negative sign.

'And, during the previous few hours, you didn't notice anyone watching you?'

It was no again.

'Did you light a cigarette?'

There was astonishment in Janvier's eyes, then he smiled faintly. He had understood Maigret's thought.

'Yes,' his eyelids said.

According to the doctor, in fact, the shot had been fired from a distance of about ten metres. And yet there was no streetlight near Mademoiselle Clément's house. Janvier was only a silhouette in the night.

As he lit his cigarette, he had obviously provided a more precise target. 'You didn't hear a window opening at any point?'

The wounded man took the time to think and at last shook his head, but with a certain hesitation.

'Do you mean it wasn't at that moment that you heard the sound of a window?'

That was it.

'I suppose that in the course of the evening several windows were opened or closed?'

The evening had been warm, so naturally there were. Janvier confirmed as much.

'In Mademoiselle Clément's house as well?'

Yes again.

'But not around the time the shot was fired?'

No.

'Can you remember which direction you were facing when you were hit?'

Nothing, in fact, could be deduced from the position of the body when it was discovered, because sometimes a man struck by a bullet turns 180 or 360 degrees as he falls.

The effort to remember was so great that Janvier's face contorted with pain. Madame Janvier wasn't listening to them any more, and not only out of discretion. She had joined the nurse and was talking to her in a low voice, probably asking questions, risking timid recommendations.

No, Janvier didn't remember. It was natural too. He had paced so

much, that evening, on the same bit of pavement …

'Have you discovered a clue, whether about Paulus or his accomplice, which doesn't appear in your reports?'

It was almost the only plausible explanation, but, once again, Janvier replied in the negative.

'And you haven't found anything about another current case, or even an old case?'

Janvier smiled again, guessing at Maigret's reasoning.

It was no. All the explanations proved to be false, one after the other.

'In short, you lit a cigarette, and the shot went off. You didn't hear footsteps. You didn't hear a sound. You fell, and you lost consciousness.'

'I'm sorry to have to interrupt you, sir; the doctor gave strict instructions.'

'Don't worry, son. Try not to think about any of that.'

He saw a question on the inspector's lips, and the inspector knew him well enough to guess.

'As of today, I'm installing myself at Rue Lhomond in Mademoiselle Clément's house, and I'll have to end up by discovering the truth, won't I?'

Poor Janvier! It was clear that he was imagining the chief inspector in the fat woman's rooming house, and would very much have liked to go there with him!

'I must leave you, Albert. Madame Dambois is being kind enough to look after the children while I'm away. I'll come every day. I'm told that tomorrow I'll be able to stay a bit longer.'

She was putting on a brave face but, when she found herself in the corridor with Maigret, she couldn't keep from crying as she walked, and he held her gently by the arm, without saying anything, without trying to console her.

He preferred to telephone from his apartment, which seemed almost alien to him. Not only was he there on his own, without anyone to talk to, but except on Sundays he wasn't used to being there at that time of day.

He had opened the windows wide, had poured himself a little glass of sloe brandy and, while waiting for the call, was stuffing linen and toiletries into his old leather suitcase.

It was also in a hospital that he finally got through to Madame

Maigret, because she had persuaded them to keep in her sister, who was going into convalescence.

Probably because she felt far away, because she was afraid that he couldn't hear her, she adopted a high, unfamiliar voice, which made the receiver rattle.

'No, nothing's happened to me. I'm calling you to ask you not to call me here this evening. And to tell you why you didn't get through to me last night.'

They had agreed that he would call her at about eleven o'clock every evening.

'Janvier's been wounded. Yes, Janvier … No. He's out of danger … Hello! But to pursue the inquiry I've had to move in to Rue Lhomond … It's a rooming house … I'll be fine here … No, really …! I assure you … The owner is charming …'

He hadn't intended to use that word, which made him smile.

'Have you got a pencil and some paper? Take down the number … From now on call me a bit earlier, between nine and ten, so as not to wake the whole house, because the phone is in the corridor on the ground floor … No, I haven't forgotten anything … It's almost warm … I assure you that I don't need a raincoat …'

He paid another visit to the sideboard, where the gilt-edged decanter was kept, and finally left his flat, holding his heavy suitcase, locked the door and felt a little as if he were committing an act of betrayal.

Was it only because of the inquiry that he was moving into Rue Lhomond or because he dreaded going back to an empty flat?

Mademoiselle Clément hurried to meet him, very agitated, her large breasts wobbling in her blouse like jelly.

'I haven't touched anything in the room, because you advised me not to; I've just changed the sheets and put on new blankets.

Vauquelin, sitting in an armchair by the window, in the front room, a cup of coffee within reach, had got up and insisted on carrying Maigret's suitcase upstairs.

It was a curious house, which didn't fit neatly into the normal categories of rooming houses. Although it was old, it was astonishingly clean and emanated a sense of gaiety. The wallpaper, everywhere, including the staircase, was light in colour, mostly pale-yellow, with little flowers and nothing old-fashioned or conventional. The woodwork, polished by time, gave off rippling reflections of light, and the steps, uncarpeted, smelled of wax.

The rooms were bigger than in most furnished houses. They were more like the rooms in a good provincial inn, and almost all the furniture was old, the wardrobes big and deep, the chests of drawers potbellied.

In an unusual touch, Mademoiselle Clément had put some flowers in a vase in the middle of the round table, unpretentious flowers, which she must have bought from a little cart when she did her shopping.

She had gone upstairs with them.

'You don't want me to arrange your things? I don't have a sense that you're used to doing that.'

She added, laughing with a curious, throaty laugh that made her bosom quiver:

'Unless your suitcase contains things that I'm not allowed to see?'

He suspected her of being like this with all her tenants, not out of servility, or out of a sense of professional duty, but out of choice. He even wondered if she wasn't a kind of Madame Maigret, a Madame Maigret who hadn't had a husband to look after, and who consoled herself by coddling her tenants.

'Have you been keeping this house for a long time, Mademoiselle Clément?'

'Ten years, Monsieur Maigret.'

'Are you originally from Paris?'

'From Lille. Roubaix, to be precise. Do you know the Brasserie Flamande in Roubaix? My father was a waiter there for almost forty years, and everyone knew him. I wasn't yet twenty when I joined as a cashier.'

You would have thought, listening to her, that she had been playing at being a cashier as she might have played with dolls as a child and was now playing at being the landlady of a rooming house.

'My dream was to settle in Paris on my own. When my father died, leaving me a small inheritance, I bought this house. I couldn't live on my own. I need to feel life around me.'

'Did you never think of marrying?'

'I wouldn't have been my own master. Now, if you would be so kind as to go downstairs for a moment. I would be embarrassed to arrange your things in front of you. I'd rather you left me alone.'

Maigret gestured to Vauquelin to follow him. On the staircase they heard repeated phrases on the piano, and a woman's voice

doing vocal exercises. It came from the ground floor.

'Who is it?'

And Vauquelin, who already knew the house, explained:

'Monsieur Valentin. His real name is Valentin Desquerre. He was quite well known as a singer of operettas, thirty years ago, under the name of Valentin.'

'The room on the left, if I remember correctly.'

'Yes. Not just a room, but a flat. He has a little sitting room at the front of the house, where he gives singing lessons, then a bedroom, a bathroom and even a kitchen. He does his own cooking. Most of his pupils are little girls …'

Vauquelin added, taking some papers from his pocket, as they reached the ground floor:

'I've made you a map of the building, with the names of the tenants and a summary of their stories. You'll hardly need it, because Mademoiselle Clément will tell you it all, without you even having to ask. It's an odd house, you'll see. People come and go as if they were at home, they go into the kitchen, heat up some coffee and, since the telephone is in the corridor, everyone knows about everyone else's business. Mademoiselle Clément will want to prepare you something to eat. She tried it with me. I preferred to go to the little bistro a few doors down.'

They went there together. The awning was stretched over the two tables on the terrace, and inside a bricklayer was drinking a glass of white wine. The landlord was from the Auvergne; he had a deep-black moustache and wore his hair brushed low over his forehead.

It was hard to imagine that Boulevard Saint-Michel, with all its bustling activity, was just around the corner. Children played in the middle of the street, as if in a little provincial town. The sound of hammering came from a nearby workshop.

'I think I'll be taking my meals here for a few days,' Maigret said to the landlord.

'As long as you're not too picky, my wife does her best …'

At eleven in the morning Gastine-Renette, the weapons expert, had sent in his report, which had troubled Maigret considerably. The bullet that had wounded Janvier, in fact, came from a high-calibre revolver, probably a Colt.

And yet that was a heavy, clumsy weapon, used mostly in the army, but difficult to hide in a suit pocket.

'Has anyone been roaming around outside the house since this

morning?' asked Maigret, clinking glasses with Vauquelin.

'A few journalists. Some press photographers from the papers.'

'Have you picked up any interesting phone calls?'

'No. A man telephoned young Mademoiselle Blanche, who came down in her nightie and dressing gown. A beautiful girl.'

'At about what time?'

'Eleven o'clock.'

'Did she go out?'

'No. She went back to bed.'

'Profession?'

'None. She says she's a dramatic artist because she's managed to get some small parts at Châtelet or I don't know where. An uncle comes to see her twice or three times a week.'

'An uncle?'

'I'm talking like Mademoiselle Clément. I wonder, in fact, whether she's acting stupid or whether she really is naive. If it's the latter, she's as thick as two short planks. "Mademoiselle Blanche studies her roles, you know?" she said to me. That's why she stays in bed almost all the time. Her uncle pays her a lot of attention. He wants her to be a great artiste. She's very young: barely twenty-two …'

'Have you seen the uncle?'

'Not yet. It's his day tomorrow. All I know is that he's "very polite" and "perfectly correct" …'

'The others?'

'Charming too, of course. Everyone is "charming" in that house. Above Monsieur Valentin, on the first floor, there are the Lotards, who have a one-year-old baby.'

'Why do they live in a rooming house?'

'They've only just arrived in Paris and they haven't yet found an apartment. They cook on a paraffin stove, in the bathroom. I went into their room; they have strings stretched from one wall to the other, with clothes drying.'

'What does Lotard do?'

'He's in insurance. About thirty, tall and sad; his wife is a short little woman who comes down from time to time to chat with Mademoiselle Clément and leaves her door open to hear the baby when he wakes up. She hates Monsieur Valentin because of his piano. Monsieur Valentin must hate her because of the baby that cries every night.'

‘Do they have a flat as well?’

‘Just a bedroom and a bathroom. Behind them, in the room overlooking the courtyard, there’s a student, Oscar Fachin, who makes his living by copying out music and looks as if he doesn’t eat every day. From time to time, Mademoiselle Clément brings him up a cup of tea. Apparently he always refuses it at first, because he’s very proud. When he goes out, she goes and gets his socks to darn them. He hides them, but she always manages to get her hands on them.’

What would Paulus be doing while they were there chatting by a tin counter, drinking a little glass of white wine in the air warmed by the sun that came in through the open door?

The police had his data. He would have known by now that the house on Rue Lhomond was under surveillance. He had probably known since the first search, because he hadn’t come back.

Maigret had given Lucas the task of finding both him and his accomplice, the brown-haired man of about twenty-five.

‘Shall I go on watching the house?’ asked Vauquelin, who had just about had enough of Mademoiselle Clément and this quiet bit of street.

‘No. Not the house as such. Later on, at dinnertime, when the people have gone back to their rooms, I’d like you to go and question all the neighbours. It’s possible that one of them might have seen or heard something.’

Maigret dined on his own at the Auvergnat’s bistro, reading the evening paper and sometimes glancing at the rooming house.

When he got back at around 7.30 there was a pretty girl in the second room, which served as dining room and kitchen. She wore a little bright red hat. She was fresh-faced, with very curly blonde hair.

‘Mademoiselle Isabelle!’ said Mademoiselle Clément. ‘She lives on the second floor. She works as a typist in an office on Rue Montmartre.’

‘Detective Chief Inspector Maigret.’

He greeted her.

‘Mademoiselle Isabelle was just telling me that Paulus tried to woo her. I didn’t know anything about it.’

‘Oh! It’s so vague … I don’t think we could call it wooing … I only mentioned it to show what kind of a boy he is …’

‘And what kind is that?’

‘In the morning I like to have a croissant in a bar on Rue Gay-Lussac before taking my Métro. One day I noticed a young man drinking his café crème at the same counter and staring at me. More precisely, he was looking at me in the mirror. We had never spoken to one another, but I recognized him. He must have recognized me too. When I left, he followed me. Then I heard his footsteps getting faster, I saw his shadow overtaking me, he came level with me and then asked if he could come with me.’

‘Isn’t that delightful?’ exclaimed Mademoiselle Clément.

‘Perhaps I was in a bad mood that morning. I’m never in a very good mood in the morning. I told him I was big enough to find my way all by myself.’

‘And then?’

‘Nothing. By the time I turned my head he had turned round, muttering some words of apology. That was why I mentioned it to Mademoiselle Clément. It’s rare for a young man to be so shy. Usually they insist, if only to save face.’

‘So in short, you think it’s odd that so shy a young man should attack the manager of a nightclub and then, later, shoot at a police inspector?’

‘Doesn’t that strike you as odd?’

In the end they hadn’t been able to conceal from the press the identity of the ‘gangster of Rue Campagne-Première’, as the papers called him. They had even published a photograph found among his things on the front page.

‘Perhaps if you had listened to him, nothing would have happened,’ Mademoiselle Clément said dreamily to the girl.

‘How do you mean?’

‘He would have become your boyfriend. He’d have had other things on his mind besides robbing a bar …’

‘It’s time for me to go. I’m going to the cinema with a friend. Good evening …’

When she had gone, Mademoiselle Clément murmured:

‘Delightful, isn’t it? She starts by announcing that she’s not going out, that she’s behind with some tailoring, because she makes her dresses herself. Then, half an hour later, I hear her coming downstairs with her hat on. She’s suddenly remembered that she was meeting a friend to go to the cinema. Those young ones, they can’t bear feeling locked up …’

‘Does she have a boyfriend?’

‘Just a cousin.’

‘Who comes to see her from time to time?’

‘He goes up for a moment when they’re going out together, all open and above board. That’s quite rare, because I think he works in the evening. Except on Sundays …’

‘On Sundays?’

‘They go to the country. When it rains they stay up there.’

She looked at him with a disarming smile.

‘In short, you only have nice people here!’

‘There are so many more nice people in the world than you think! I don’t understand how people can see wickedness everywhere. Wait! Here’s Monsieur Kridelka coming back,’ she added, after glancing through the spyhole.

He was a man in his forties, with darker hair than the Auvergnat in the bistro and a pale complexion, who wiped his feet mechanically on the mat before going upstairs.

‘He lives on the second floor as well, the room next to Mademoiselle Isabelle.’

Maigret consulted the notes that Vauquelin had given him.

‘He’s Yugoslavian,’ he said.

‘He’s lived in Paris for a long time.’

‘What does he do?’

‘You would never guess. He’s a nurse in a mental hospital. That’s probably why he doesn’t talk much. Apparently it’s a very tough job. He deserves some credit, because he was a lawyer back home. You don’t want to come and sit down in the sitting room?’

She sat down herself with a piece of pale-blue knitting on her knees and started juggling with the needles.

‘It’s for the Lotards’ baby. Some landladies don’t want children in the house. As far as I’m concerned, as I say, we need a bit of everything, pianos as well as children. Madame Saft is expecting a baby as well.

‘Who’s that?’

‘Second floor, on the right of the corridor. She’s French, but he’s Polish. If you had arrived a few minutes earlier you’d have seen him coming home. He’s the one who does the shopping when he comes back from the office. They eat mostly cold food. I don’t think she likes cooking. She was a student. He’s finished his studies.’

‘Studies in what?’

‘Chemistry. He didn’t find a job as a chemist and works as an

assistant pharmacist near Rue de Rennes. People are brave, don't you think? They haven't found an apartment either. When I see a couple introducing themselves, I know in advance what they're going to say, that it's temporary, that they'll have accommodation soon. The Lotards have been waiting for three years. The Safts hope to move before the baby's born.'

That made her laugh, with her curious, throaty laugh. It didn't take much to put her in a state of joy. She was like those nuns who cheer up convent life by deriving amusement from the most innocent jokes.

'Did you know Paulus well, Mademoiselle Clément?'

'I knew him as well as I know the others. He had only been here for five months.'

'What sort of young man was he?'

'You've heard what Mademoiselle Isabelle told you. That's him to a T. He was so shy that he looked away when he walked past the spyhole.'

'Did he get a lot of mail?'

'Only the odd letter from Limoges. They came from his family. I recognized the two handwritings, his father's and his mother's. His mother wrote to him twice a week, and his father once a month. He always looked impressed when I gave him the letters from his father.'

'Did he never take women to his room?'

'He wouldn't have dared.'

'When his friend came to see him, did you know he was going to sleep here?'

'No. I was even worried, the first time. I was waiting for him to leave before I went to sleep, because I don't like to be woken when I'm dropping off. In the morning he came down on tiptoes before it was quite daylight, and I was amused by that. I have a brother who was like that. He's married now and lives in Indochina. When we were at home and he was seventeen or eighteen, he brought some friends to his room, secretly, boys who didn't dare to go home because it was too late.'

'Did Paulus confide in you at all?'

'We were good friends, in the end. He sometimes came to say goodnight, he told me how difficult it was to sell encyclopedias. His briefcase was so heavy, with that fat book in it, that his arm was swollen. He often skipped meals, I'm sure.'

‘How did you know?’

‘Sometimes he came back when I was having dinner. I just had to see the way he glanced at my plate, the way he sniffed the smells of cooking to understand. I said kindly: “Will you have a bowl of soup with me at least, Monsieur Paulus?” At first he refused, claiming that he was leaving the table. Then he ended up sitting opposite me.’

She looked at him with her clear eyes.

‘Did he pay you regularly?’

‘You can tell that you’ve never run a rooming house, Monsieur Maigret. They *never* pay regularly, *none of them*, you see. If they were able to pay regularly, they probably wouldn’t be here. I don’t want to be indiscreet and show you my notebook, the one in which I write the sums they owe me.

‘But they’re still honest. They give me the money in the end, often in small sums.’

‘Even Monsieur Valentin?’

‘He’s the most penniless of them all. The girls who come and take singing lessons pay him even more irregularly, and some of them don’t pay him at all.’

‘And he gives them lessons anyway?’

‘Probably because he thinks they’re gifted? He’s so kind!’

At that very moment, Maigret turned towards her for no precise reason, and he had a sense that he saw a different expression from the usual on the fat woman’s face. Unfortunately it was only a flash, and a moment later her eyes were lowered over her pale-blue knitting.

What he thought he had discovered, in place of the joyful candour that she usually displayed, was an irony which was neither less cheerful nor less childish, but which troubled him.

At first he had told himself it was a phenomenon of the kind one encounters from time to time.

He wondered now if his exultation wasn’t down to the fact that she was playing a part, not just to deceive him, not just to hide something from him, but for the pleasure of acting a part.

‘Are you enjoying yourself, Mademoiselle Clément?’

‘I always enjoy myself, Monsieur Maigret.’

This time she looked at him with all her candour back in place. In girls’ schools it’s rare not to encounter at least one girl who is a head taller than the others and has that same puffy flesh. At the age

of thirteen or fourteen they look like enormous china dolls, with clear eyes that see nothing of life, and with a smile directed at their dreams.

Until now, Maigret hadn't met a forty-year-old version of the same thing.

The smoke from his pipe turned the air increasingly blue, forming a moving blanket around the salmon-coloured lampshade.

It was a strange sensation to be there, sitting in an armchair, almost as if he was at home, except that at home he would have taken his jacket off. He was still sure that she would ask him to do just that in a day or two.

He jumped when he heard the phone ringing and looked at the time on his watch.

'That must be for me …' he said, hurrying to pick it up.

And, like the day before on the boulevards, he was slightly embarrassed, he felt almost guilty.

'It's me, yes … You didn't have too much trouble getting a line …? Fine … Fine … I assure you that I'm fine … No, quite calm … I'm being looked after, yes … How is your sister?'

When he hung up and came back to the sitting room, Mademoiselle Clément's eyes were lowered over a book, and she waited until he was sitting down and had relit his pipe before asking airily:

'Your wife?'

3.

In which the mention of a glass of cold beer plays an important part, and Maigret discovers one of Mademoiselle Clément's tenants in an unexpected place

Maigret spent a good part of the night swearing, grumbling and sometimes groaning; ten times he cursed the idea he had had of coming to stay in the rooming house on Rue Lhomond, and there were moments when he was ashamed of it, as if he were accusing himself of yielding to some shameful tendency, or at least some unmentionable weakness. But when morning came he felt quite content to be there.

Should he blame the chartreuse? He had always detested liqueurs. Mademoiselle Clément, on the contrary, seemed to love them.

Just as she had done the previous day, she had had no hesitation in going and getting the bottle from the sideboard and, at the very sight of the syrupy green liquid, her face expressed a childish greed, her eyes shone, her lips moistened.

He hadn't had the courage to refuse. In the end it was an evening in green and blue, the green of the liqueur and the pale blue of the knitting, which was lengthening invisibly in the landlady's lap.

They hadn't drunk a lot, because the glasses were tiny. When he had gone up to his room, Maigret wasn't even slightly tipsy, and Mademoiselle Clément, when he had left her downstairs, only had a slightly more ringing laugh than usual.

He hadn't turned the light on straight away. After taking off his tie and opening his collar, he had gone towards the window and leaned against it, as thousands of Parisians must have been doing that night.

The air had a velvety smoothness which was almost palpable. No

movement, no sound troubled the peace of Rue Lhomond, which falls at almost imperceptible gradient towards the lights of Rue Mouffetard. Somewhere, behind the houses, a rumble could be heard, the muffled sounds of cars passing along Boulevard Saint-Michel, of brakes and car-horns, but all that was in another world; between the roofs of the houses, between the chimney-pots, there was a splendid vista of an infinity populated by stars.

Monsieur Kridelka must have been sleeping in the next room, because there was no sound, and the window wasn't lit.

Lowering his head, Maigret could see in the darkness, or rather guess, the place on the pavement where Janvier had fallen.

The streetlight was further away, shining, alone.

After a moment of stillness, you could pick up the pulsations of the house.

On the first floor, the Lotards had gone to bed too. But someone, probably the wife, soon got up again because the baby was crying. She didn't turn the main light on, just a night-light, because only a faint glimmer appeared in their window. In her nightdress, barefoot, she must have been preparing something for him, probably a bottle; he thought he heard a clink of a glass, and at the same time she hummed mechanically.

It was at that moment, around 11.30, that Mademoiselle Blanche turned out her light. She had finished her book, and, a little while later, the sound of the toilet flushing could be heard.

The little bistro, further off, where Maigret had had his dinner, had closed its doors long ago, and it was at around the same time, at 11.30, that for no reason Maigret had started thinking about a nice cold glass of beer. Perhaps because a bus had braked near Boulevard Saint-Michel and had reminded him of its brasseries?

It quickly turned into an obsession. The chartreuse had made his mouth pasty, and he felt that his throat was still thick with the mutton stew that he had had at the Auvergnat's bistro, and which he had thought was so tasty.

For a moment he thought about putting his tie back on, going out, creeping downstairs and running to the nearest brasserie.

Mademoiselle Clément had gone to bed. He would have to wake her up to go out, and then again to come back.

He lit a pipe, still leaning on the window-sill, breathing in the night, but that idea of beer wouldn't let him go.

Here and there, in the darkness of the houses opposite, rectangles

of varying brightness appeared, not many, five or six, and sometimes one of them went out; sometimes, behind the curtains or blinds, shadows could be seen moving in silence.

It must have been exactly the same the day before, when poor Janvier was pacing back and forth on the pavement.

He heard a noise, at the end of the street. Then voices that echoed oddly among the houses, a man's voice and a woman's voice. It was almost possible to make out what they were saying. They held each other by the arms. They stopped two buildings along. A hand tugged a bell-pull, and a moment later the couple disappeared, and a door shut heavily.

Facing him, on the first floor, behind a faintly lit blind, a man frequently passed back and forth, then became invisible before appearing again.

A taxi stopped outside the door. A certain amount of time passed without anyone getting out, and Maigret thought that a couple must be kissing inside. It was Mademoiselle Isabelle who got out, humming, and made for the doorway, turning back several times towards the person in the car.

He heard the muffled bell, thought of Mademoiselle Clément asleep, pressing her face to the spyhole after turning on the light. Footsteps on the stairs. Then, very close to him, a key in the lock, followed almost immediately by the creak of a mattress and two shoes falling on the floor. He would have sworn that the girl uttered a sigh of relief as she took her shoes off and that she was now stroking her aching feet.

She got undressed and ran some water.

The sound made him even thirstier, and he too walked towards the tap and filled the tooth mug. The liquid tasted stale.

Then, in a bad temper, he took his clothes off, with the window still open, brushed his teeth and went to bed.

At first he thought he was going to go to sleep straight away. He dozed. His breathing became regular. The images from the day began to mix in a half-sleep.

And yet, five or ten minutes later, he was completely awake, his eyes open, thinking harder than ever about a glass of beer. This time he felt a burning in his stomach and had no doubt that it was the mutton stew. On Boulevard Richard-Lenoir, he would have got up to take a little bicarbonate of soda. He hadn't brought any and didn't dare wake Mademoiselle Clément to ask her for some. He

closed his eyes again and sank as deeply as possible into his bed and then started to feel little gusts of air wandering over his skull and the back of his neck.

He got up to go and close the window. The man opposite still hadn't gone to bed. He was pacing the room behind the blind, and Maigret wondered what he could be doing, walking around like that. Perhaps he was an actor rehearsing a part? Or maybe talking to someone sitting down whose outline couldn't be seen.

There was another light, right at the top, in the attic of the same house, and he would see that light again in the early hours of the morning.

He slept, he had to sleep. A bad, agitated sleep, never quite losing consciousness of the place where he was, or of his problems, which in fact assumed an exaggerated importance.

It almost became an affair of state, even worse, a matter of life or death. The slightest details were magnified, as if seen through a drunken haze. He had a responsibility not only towards Janvier, but towards Janvier's wife, who was so brave and so tired.

Had she not looked at him as if to tell him that she was putting her fate and that of her unborn baby in his hands? Madame Maigret wasn't there. And for that too, God knows why, he felt guilty.

He was thirsty. Every now and again the burning in his chest became more acute, and he was aware that he was uttering a groan; he had to be careful not to wake the tenants, particularly the Lotards' baby, which had gone back to sleep.

As for him, he shouldn't have gone to sleep. He was there to watch. His duty was to listen to sounds, to spy on comings and goings.

A taxi moving down the street made so much noise that it seemed to be insulting the silence. It stopped. A door slammed. But it was further off, at least ten houses away.

Everyone was sleeping. He thought of Mademoiselle Isabelle turning over in her bed, the blonde's body must already be quite clammy. The Safts, in the other room, were lying in the same bed. He had visited their room. The bed was so narrow that he wondered how there was room for them both.

He sat down on his own bed. More precisely, he found himself sitting on his bed without being aware of having moved and, all of a sudden, he pricked up his ears. He was sure he had heard an unusual sound, perhaps a chink of porcelain or china.

He waited, motionless, holding his breath, and there was a second sound, on the ground floor, this time a dresser being closed.

He struck a match to look at his watch. It was half past two in the morning.

Barefoot, he went and cautiously opened the door and then, sure that someone had got up, he put on his trousers and slipped on to the stairs.

He hadn't reached the first floor when he made a step creak. It must always have creaked. He could have sworn that a moment before there was a faint light in the corridor, like the one that seeps from beneath the door of a lit room.

And yet it had gone out all of a sudden. He stopped. And, the more he listened, the more sure he was that someone was listening to him too, someone who, like himself, in the darkness, was holding his breath.

He went downstairs more quickly and felt around until he felt the kitchen door handle.

A cup fell on the floor and broke.

He turned on the switch.

In front of him, Mademoiselle Clément was standing in her nightdress, her hair held in a kind of net. For a moment it was impossible to read anything on her face but confusion but then, when you might have least expected it, she exploded in a throaty laugh that made her big breasts bounce.

'You scared me,' she exclaimed. 'My God, I was scared!'

The gas was burning in the stove. The kitchen smelled of fresh coffee. There was an enormous ham sandwich on the waxed tablecloth.

'I was so frightened when I heard footsteps that I turned out the light. When the footsteps approached, it made me drop my cup …'

Fat though she was, her body under her nightdress was still young and appetizing.

'Were you hungry too?'

He asked, without knowing where to look:

'Did you get up to eat?'

She laughed again, more briefly, and blushed a little.

'It happens to me almost every night. I know I shouldn't eat so much, but it's stronger than me. I'm like that king of France who always had a cold chicken on his bedside table.'

She took another cup from the dresser.

‘Would you like some coffee?’

He didn’t dare ask her if she happened to have a beer. Without waiting for a reply, she served him.

‘Perhaps I should go and put on a dressing gown. If someone surprised us …’

It was funny, in fact. Maigret had no jacket on. His braces dangled at his side, and his hair was sticking up.

‘Will you excuse me for a second?’

She went into her room and came out again almost immediately, and he noticed that some of her lipstick had been dabbed away, which gave her mouth a very different expression.

‘Would you like a piece?’

He wasn’t hungry. Just thirsty.

‘Sit down …’

She had turned off the gas. The coffee steamed in the cups. The sandwich, on the plate, was golden and crisp.

‘Did I wake you, Monsieur Maigret?’

‘I wasn’t sleeping.’

‘Usually I’m not fearful. I don’t think I’ve ever even locked my door. But after what happened last night I feel less reassured …’

She bit into the bread. He drank a mouthful of coffee. Then, mechanically, he started stuffing a pipe. Except that his matches were still in his jacket and he got up to take the box above the stove, on the spice shelf.

At first she ate in great mouthfuls, like a hungry person, then, gradually she chewed more slowly, sometimes casting little intrigued glances at Maigret.

‘Has everyone come back?’ he asked.

‘Everyone but Monsieur Fachin, the student, who went to see a friend. They club together to buy books. They take it in turn to attend classes, and then they get together to study. It gives them time to earn a living. I had one who was a night watchman in a bank and who only slept for three or four hours in the day.’

‘Do you sleep a lot?’

‘It depends. I’m more of a big eater than a sleeper. What about you?’

The last mouthfuls were going down less easily.

‘I feel better. Now I can go to bed once and for all. You don’t need anything?’

‘Nothing, thank you.’

‘Goodnight, Monsieur Maigret.’

He went back up the stairs. On the first floor he heard the murmur of a half-sleeping child and a regular, rhythmic sound, probably that of the cradle that the mother was rocking from her bed, in the darkness, to stop the baby from waking up completely.

This time, in spite of the coffee, he fell asleep straight away, a dreamless sleep that seemed very short. The light woke him up, because he hadn’t closed the curtains, and it was 5.30 in the morning when he went and leaned on the window-sill again.

In the morning light the street was even more deserted than it had been at night, and, because of the cold, Maigret had to put his jacket on.

The sky, between the rooftops, was a very pale blue, without a cloud, and most of the houses looked gilded. A policeman coming on duty walked with big, regular strides towards the end of the street.

On the first floor, opposite, they had raised the blind, and Maigret could see right inside the chaotic bedroom, in which a suitcase was open near the window. It was an old make of suitcase, modest and worn, the kind used by travelling salesmen who move around a lot, taking their samples with them.

A middle-aged man was coming and going, and, when he leaned down, Maigret could see from above that his skull was largely exposed. He could make out his face less clearly.

He would have said he was fifty-five or more. More, in fact. He was fully dressed, in dark clothes. He finished arranging some white shirts in the upper compartment, then he closed the lid and sat down on it in order to fasten it shut.

Half of the bed was revealed, a pillow that still bore the indentation of a head.

For a moment Maigret wondered if there was still someone in the bed, and the answer was immediately supplied by a woman’s arm.

The man dragged his suitcase, probably to the landing, and leaned over the bed to kiss his wife. Then he came back and, this time, removed a little box from the drawer of the bedside table, took two pills from it, filled a glass with water and held it out to the invisible person.

He must have made a phone call, because a taxi came up the street and stopped outside the house. Before leaving, the man drew

the curtain, and Maigret saw nothing more until the front door finally opened.

The suitcase was heavy, and the driver left his seat to help his customer.

Now voices could be heard.

'Gare Montparnasse. And hurry.'

The door slammed.

A window opened, on the other side of the street, on the third floor, above Maigret's head, and a woman in curlers, clutching her mauve bathrobe to her chest, leaned out over the street.

She spotted the inspector. His face was strange to her, and she looked a little surprised, then took a moment to study him before disappearing into her room.

All he saw was her hand shaking a duster above the void.

There were stirrings in the Lotard flat. A tall young red-haired man came in and, following the sound of his footsteps through the house, Maigret knew that it was Oscar Fachin, the student, who went to bed straight away.

Would Mademoiselle Clément, whom the student had woken when he came back, get back to sleep?

At 6.30 the Safts got up in turn, and a vague smell of coffee spread through the whole floor.

Mademoiselle Isabelle didn't get out of bed until 7.15 and immediately turned on the tap.

Monsieur Kridelka was still asleep. Monsieur Valentin too. As to Mademoiselle Blanche, there wasn't a sound from her, and, much later, when everyone had left the house, she must still have been plunged in sleep.

Maigret had smoked three or four pipes when he decided to wash himself. Monsieur Lotard left, then Monsieur Saft, whom he saw on the pavement with a worn briefcase under his arm.

He didn't want coffee, but a glass of white wine, and his thirst was aroused at the sight of the Auvergnat drawing up his shutters and putting out chairs and tables.

He went down to the ground floor and looked towards the two spyholes, the one in the bedroom and the one in the kitchen-dining room, without seeing Mademoiselle Clément. Admittedly the bedroom spyhole was covered with a dark curtain. She was probably washing herself too.

The front door was open, and as he passed through it he bumped

into a thin woman, with short legs, all dressed in black, who walked resolutely and entered the sitting room as if she was in her own home. She turned to look at him. When he turned too, their eyes met, and she didn't look down. He even had the impression that she shrugged her shoulders and muttered something under her breath. He noticed without much surprise that she was wearing men's shoes.

'A little glass of white wine,' he said to the Auvergnat, whose shirt was the same faded blue as the sky.

'So, nobody killed last night?'

He saw Mademoiselle Isabelle passing, very fresh-looking, in a navy-blue suit. He stared fixedly at the house, and those who were used to working with him, like Lucas, or like the unfortunate Janvier, would have understood that an idea was running through his head.

'Do you know where Mademoiselle Clément does her shopping?'

'Rue Mouffetard, like everyone here. There are some shops on Rue Gay-Lussac, but it's more expensive. And on Rue Saint-Jacques the butcher's isn't as good.'

Maigret drank three glasses of a white wine with a greenish tint, then, with his hands in his jacket pockets, walked slowly down the street as if he were already a local. A little old man in front of him was taking his dog for a walk and greeted him the way people in the country greet people they don't know. Perhaps because he looked so much at home? He returned the greeting with a smile and, a few minutes later, he was walking along the narrow Rue Mouffetard, which was filled with little carts that spread a strong smell of fruits and vegetables.

Pearls of dew still trembled on the cabbages and lettuces – unless it was the traders who had sprayed them with water to keep them fresh.

It was the butcher's shop that he was looking for, and he found it straight away. Behind the white marble counter stood a red-cheeked woman in a bodice laced up to the neck, who still smelled of her village.

He waited until he was alone with her, allowing two customers who had followed him in to take his place in the queue.

'What will it be?'

'Some information. Mademoiselle Clément, on Rue Lhomond, shops here, isn't that right?'

‘For ten years now.’

‘Is she a good customer?’

‘It’s not as if she feeds her tenants, like some landladies do. But she’s a regular customer.’

‘Does she have a good appetite …?’ he asked, joking.

‘She likes her food, yes. Are you staying at her place?’

‘Since yesterday.’

‘Does she give you your meals?’

‘Sometimes.’

She hadn’t taken the trouble to think about the meaning of these questions. Suddenly a thought seemed to strike her.

‘Only since yesterday?’

‘Yesterday evening …’

‘I would have thought you’d been there for several days.’

He was just opening his mouth when an old woman came in and he decided to leave it. When he found himself back on Rue Mouffetard he was quite cheerful. He had to go into a bar to make a phone call. Then a kind of loyalty to his Auvergnat made him wait until he was on Rue Lhomond, perhaps along with the memory of white wine with an aftertaste of country inn.

‘Do you have a telephone?’

‘Behind the door at the back.’

It was nine in the morning. Time for his report at Quai des Orfèvres. The senior officers would be coming into the commissioner’s big office with the wide windows overlooking the panorama of the Seine.

‘Hello …! Put me through to Lucas, please …’

The operator recognized his voice.

‘Right away, sir.’

Then Lucas:

‘Is that you, chief?’

‘Any news?’

‘Vauquelin is writing his report on the assignment you gave him. I don’t think he’s come up with much.’

‘Have you heard anything about Janvier?’

‘I just called Cochin. He had a restless night, but the doctor assured me that was only to be expected. His temperature is fine. Are you still at Mademoiselle Clément’s? Did you sleep well?’

There was no mockery in Lucas’ voice, but Maigret was still irritated.

‘Are you free? Can you get the car and come to Rue Lhomond? Stop a little way away from the house and wait. No rush. Leave it for at least half an hour.’

Lucas didn’t dare ask any questions, and Maigret sniffed the smell of cooking that surrounded the telephone, pulled a face when he realized that it was mutton again and went to have one last glass at the bar.

When he got back to Mademoiselle Clément’s, the woman with the men’s shoes that he had bumped into on his way out obstructed his passage. She had her head down, her bottom in the air and was busy washing the tiles of the corridor with lots of water.

There was no one in the sitting room, which had already been tidied. Mademoiselle Clément was in the kitchen, wearing a pale-coloured dress, her face fresh, her eyes cheerful.

‘Did you go out for your breakfast?’ she asked him. ‘If you’d asked me I’d have made it for you.’

‘Do you sometimes give your tenants their meals?’

‘Not meals as such. Sometimes I make them coffee in the morning. Or else they come down with their little cafetière and make it themselves.’

‘Did you sleep well, after your snack last night?’

‘Quite well. And you?’

There was something slightly aggressive, perhaps slightly tense, about her good mood. But Maigret thought he was wearing exactly the same expression as the previous day. But she probably had antennae. She was busy peeling potatoes.

‘Is that your housekeeper working in the corridor?’

‘Obviously it’s not someone who comes to do it for fun or exercise.’

‘I didn’t see her yesterday.’

‘That’s because she only comes four days a week. She has five children and she needs to do her own housework as well. Did you talk to her?’

‘No. Is she the one who cleans all the rooms?’

‘Not all of them. Except on Friday and Saturday, when she cleans them thoroughly.’

‘Your bedroom too?’

‘I’m still capable of taking care of my own bedroom, aren’t I?’

She was still jolly, certainly, but her gaiety was forced, and there was an electric charge between them.

‘I would like to visit your bedroom, Mademoiselle Clément.’

‘Your inspectors visited it on the first day.’

‘The day they didn’t find Paulus in the house?’

‘Yes.’

‘Could I trouble you to show it to me again?’

She shrugged, got up, tipped the peelings off her apron.

‘It hasn’t been tidied. It’s true that last night you saw me in my nightdress …’

Her throaty laugh.

‘Come on …’

She pushed the door and went in ahead of him. The room was dark, because it looked out on to the narrow courtyard. While the sun bathed the façade and gave life to everything it touched, here there was a sense of immobility, of emptiness.

And yet the room was stylish. The bed was unmade. A pretty toilet bag was arranged on the dressing table, and there were still some blonde hairs in the comb. The lavatory was hidden behind a floral cretonne curtain, and a strong smell of soap floated in the air.

‘Have you seen?’

Maigret had, in fact, seen that there was no cupboard. Indiscreet though the gesture was, he lifted the curtain to the lavatory, while Mademoiselle Clément sighed behind him:

‘Now you know what an old spinster’s bedroom is like …’

On the bedside table there was a cup containing some dregs of coffee and, in the saucer, some croissant crumbs.

‘Do you bring your own breakfast to bed?’

Maigret’s eyes were laughing now, as he looked at the enormous baby whose face was beginning to show an expression of bewilderment.

‘You are charming, Mademoiselle Clément. I am sorry to put you to so much trouble, but I must look under your bed.’

He didn’t have time to bend down. Out from under the bed there emerged a man’s shoes, a pair of trousers, arms and at last an extremely pale face in which two crazed eyes gleamed.

‘Get up, Paulus. Don’t be afraid. I won’t hurt you.’

The young man trembled. When he opened his mouth it was to stammer, tight-throated:

‘She didn’t know.’

‘What didn’t she know?’

‘That I was hiding under her bed.’

Maigret laughed. His mood was as joyful as that spring morning.

'Did you shave when she wasn't there?' he asked, because the young man's face showed anything but a four-day growth of beard.

'I swear …'

'Listen, Monsieur Maigret …' Mademoiselle Clément began.

She laughed in turn. The fact that she was able to laugh perhaps indicated that she didn't see the affair as too much of a tragedy.

'I deceived you, it's true. But it didn't happen as you think. He wasn't the one who shot your inspector.'

'Were you with him at that moment?'

'Yes.'

'In bed?'

'I suspected you were going to say that. Some people just have dirty minds. If he sometimes slept in my bed, I swear that it was when I wasn't there.'

'It's true …' Paulus broke in.

'Whatever you think, I wasn't the one who brought him into this room. I was quite frightened in the evening when I heard a faint noise under my bed.'

This time Maigret adopted a more familiar tone when he spoke to young Paulus, as if taking him under his wing.

'Were you up there when the inspectors came?'

'Yes. I was expecting it. I was terrified. I saw them through the window. Since the house only has one door, I went up to the attic.'

'They didn't search the attic?'

'Yes, they did. I just had time to get out on the roof. I stayed for part of the day, pressed against a chimney.'

'Are you scared of heights?'

'Yes. When I thought the danger had passed, I went back into the house through the skylight and crept downstairs.'

'It didn't occur to you to leave?'

'Of course. But I suspected there were still some policemen in the street.'

He wasn't ugly, just a bit thin, a little too nervous, and he had a jerky way of talking. Sometimes his speech was so chopped up it sounded as if his jaw was trembling.

And yet he seemed less afraid than one might have expected. He even seemed to be relaxing. Perhaps, in the end, being caught was a relief.

'So you went and hid in Mademoiselle Clément's bedroom?'

‘I didn’t think it would last for such a long time. I told myself I would probably have an opportunity to get away.’

‘And she found you?’

‘I must have moved without meaning to. I was sleeping. I had sworn to myself that I wouldn’t go to sleep, but it happened anyway.’

It was strange, observing the two of them, he emaciated like a young wild animal, she fat and placid like a provincial aunt.

It would have been particularly funny to have witnessed the scene that had played out in the room that night. Had Mademoiselle Clément been as surprised as she claimed?

He had probably wept, and she had probably consoled him. She had gone to get him something to eat and drink. Almost certainly, she had poured him a little glass of chartreuse.

Since then, for five days, they had lived in the same room, with just one bed, where they must have slept in turn. Because that was something that Maigret believed.

From dawn till dusk, young Paulus contemplated the springs of the mattress and gave a start at the slightest sound. He had heard the comings and goings of the inspectors, of Maigret, the questions and the answers.

Because of the continuous surveillance, Mademoiselle Clément had had to get up in the night to give him something to eat.

Maigret smiled, thinking of the enormous sandwich that he had forced her to devour at 2.30 in the morning, when she hadn’t been hungry.

A car stopped not far from the house, one of the cars from the Préfecture in which Lucas, according to Maigret’s instructions, waited patiently beside the driver.

‘What are you going to do?’ asked Mademoiselle Clément, who had heard the car as well. ‘Are you going to arrest me?’

She glanced desolately at her walls, her furniture, the house she thought she had to abandon.

‘Not straight away,’ he said. ‘It will depend. Come with me, young man. You can bring your toothbrush and a comb.’

‘My parents will know about this, won’t they?’

‘They must have found out yesterday, from the newspapers.’

‘What did my father say?’

‘I don’t know yet. There’s a chance that he will have set off for Paris yesterday evening.’

‘I’d rather not see him.’

‘I can see that! Come on.’

The young man hesitated, pointing to Mademoiselle Clément.

‘It really isn’t her fault, you know. She’s …’

He looked for the word and couldn’t find it.

‘She’s …’

‘Charming, I know. You can tell me all that at Quai des Orfèvres.’

They passed through the kitchen, the sitting room where Maigret had spent the evening chatting to the fat woman. He gestured to Lucas from the stone doorway.

And Lucas, spotting the young man, whistled with admiration.

He obviously thought that the whole business was over.

It was only beginning.

4.

Which relates an interrogation in the course of which Maigret doesn't get angry even once

Even in the little police car Maigret hadn't stopped observing young Paulus from the corner of his eye, and Lucas, who was closely watching his chief, thought he looked strange.

They hadn't handcuffed the young man. He looked eagerly out of the window and was no longer afraid; he wasn't shaking now as he had been when he came out from under Mademoiselle Clément's bed. At one point he came out with the most surprising phrase that Lucas had ever heard uttered by someone who had just been arrested. The car had turned into Boulevard Saint-Michel and was driving past a municipal water cart.

A little further on, between a glove shop and a cinema, the red sign of a tobacconist's stood out in the sunlight.

With the exact expression of a schoolboy raising his hand to ask permission to go to the toilet, Paulus said:

'I don't suppose we could stop for a moment so that I could buy some cigarettes?'

It wasn't a trick to escape. That would have been too naive. Without getting angry, and staring at him with his big, brooding eyes, Maigret had replied:

'There are some in my office.'

The inspector had returned to his office with obvious pleasure, the same pleasure that the young man had shown at the sight of the bustle of the streets in the sun.

'Sit down.'

He had taken the time to read the mail that waited for him, to give instructions on cases already under way. He had opened the window, stuffed a pipe and held out a pack of cigarettes to his

interlocutor.

'Now, tell me.'

'You know, it wasn't me who shot the inspector. I swear. Anyway, I didn't have a gun. The one I used at the Stork was a fairground toy.'

'I know.'

'You believe me, don't you? I didn't leave Mademoiselle Clément's bedroom. What reason would I have had to kill a police inspector?'

'You didn't want to leave the house?'

'Absolutely not.'

He said that quickly, with so much conviction that it was almost comical.

'Where would I have gone? Because the police had come to Rue Lhomond, they knew who I was. So I was a wanted man. So, outside, they would have arrested me in the end.'

'Was that your idea or Mademoiselle Clément's?'

'Mine. I begged her to look after me. I promised to be good and not look at her when she undressed.'

'You didn't look at her?'

'A bit.'

'Did you expect to stay in that room for a long time?'

'Until the police stopped thinking about me.'

'Where would you have gone?'

'Maybe to meet up with …'

He bit his lips and blushed.

'Go on …'

'I don't want to.'

'Why?'

'Because I mustn't let the cat out of the bag.'

'You don't want to reveal your accomplice's name? Was he the one you expected to meet up with?'

'Yes. But I'm not a snitch.'

'You'd rather be the only one to take the rap, even if you're the less guilty of the two.'

'I'm not the less guilty.'

Maigret had had many suspects of Paulus' age in his office, boys who had done more or less the same thing, for the same reasons, who had put themselves on the wrong side of the law to get hold of some money, almost always in a stupid way.

It was the first time that he had seen one like Paulus. Some of them, as soon as they were arrested, went to pieces, begged, wept, talked about their parents, sometimes sincerely, others with a sidelong glance to judge the effect produced.

Most of them were nervous, tense, arrogant. Many were exploding with hatred and blamed society.

Paulus, on the other hand, sat obediently on his chair. He smoked his cigarette in little puffs, quite calm, only giving a start when someone knocked at the door, thinking each time that it was his father, who seemed to frighten him more than prison did.

'Who came up with the idea of the job on Rue Campagne-Première?'

'We came up with it together.'

'But you were the one who knew the Stork?'

'Yes. I'd gone in there, by chance, for the first time a few weeks ago.'

'You often went to nightclubs?'

'When I had money.'

'And the toy gun was your idea too?'

'Jef …'

He broke off. He blushed again, then smiled.

'I know you'll end up making me say something I don't want to say.'

'So, better to spill the beans straight away.'

'Is there an extradition treaty with Belgium?'

'That depends on the felony.'

'But we didn't commit a felony!'

'In legal language, it's called a felony.'

'Because I didn't fire. I couldn't have fired, even if I'd wanted to.'

'Tell me, Paulus. If your friend was here, I'm sure he'd drop you in it.'

'Definitely.'

'What's his name?'

'He's a Belgian, Jef van Damme. Too bad! He used to be a waiter in a café.'

'How old?'

'Twenty-five. He's married. He got married almost as soon as he arrived in Paris, three years ago, after his military service. At that time he was working in a brasserie on Boulevard de Strasbourg and he married a bit-part actress. They have a child, a little boy.'

He was relaxed. As his cigarette had finished, he asked for another one.

'Where did you meet him?'

'In a bar, near Les Halles.'

'A long time ago?'

'Almost a year.'

'Was he still a waiter in a café?'

'He wasn't working regularly any more. He did odd jobs here and there. He was very poor.'

'Do you have his address?'

'I don't suppose you can take any action against his wife? I can tell you right away that she doesn't know a thing. I'll explain everything to you and you can believe me. Her name is Juliette. She's in poor health, she's always complaining. Jef claimed that he didn't know why he'd married her, that he had no intention of spending his life with her and that he wasn't sure the child was his.'

'Their address?'

'Rue Saint-Louis-en-l'Ile, 27A, at the end of a courtyard, third floor.'

Maigret, who had jotted down the address on a piece of paper, went into the neighbouring office to give instructions to Lucas.

'Everything all right, chief?'

He shrugged. It was almost too easy.

'Good! Let's get back to Jef and Juliette. You were saying?'

'Have you sent an inspector to her place?'

Maigret nodded.

'You'll see that I wasn't lying, that he isn't there and his wife doesn't know a thing. Only, if you repeat to her what I've told you, you'll upset her, and she's a nice girl.'

'Have you slept with her?'

'I didn't mean to.'

'Did Jef know?'

'Maybe. It's hard to tell with him. He's a lot older than me, you know? He's travelled a lot. When he was seventeen he was a steward on the boats and went all the way around the world.'

'Did he want to leave Juliette?'

'Yes. And he'd had enough of Paris. He dreamed of going to America. He needed money for that. I needed money too.'

'To do what?'

'I couldn't go on starving.'

He said those words with disarming simplicity. He was thin, underfed, with irregular features, but there was something winning about his expression.

'Did the two of you commit other robberies?'

'Only one.'

'How long ago?'

'It was when I was living with them.'

'You lived with the van Dammes?'

'For two months. First, when I came to Paris and was working on Boulevard Saint-Denis, I took a room in a hotel on Rue Rambuteau. Then I lost my job.'

'Because you were stealing from petty cash.'

'They told you that?'

'Then what did you do?'

'I looked for a job. Everyone asked me if I'd done my military service. They didn't want to take on a boy for just a few months. At night I carried vegetables at Les Halles. I walked around with a placard on my back. My parents sent me a bit of money, not enough, and I didn't dare admit to them that I was unemployed, because they would have made me go back to Limoges.'

'Why didn't you go back to Limoges?'

'Because it's no life.'

'While the one you were leading was a life?'

'I could hope for anything. I owed two months' rent, and I was going to be thrown out, when I met Jef. He let me sleep at his, on a sofa.'

'Tell me about the first robbery. Whose idea was it?'

'It was his. I didn't know it was possible. We were both sitting in a café. A middle-aged man started staring at me persistently, I didn't understand why. He looked like a provincial industrialist or big businessman. Jef told me that the man was bound to make some propositions to me as soon as I was on my own, and all I had to do was let him talk. You understand?'

'I understand only too well.'

'Once we were in the room I would threaten to call for help, and he would offer me money to keep quiet.'

'Is that what happened?'

'Yes.'

'You didn't do it again?'

'No.'

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps because I was too scared. And also it struck me as dirty.’

‘No other reasons?’

‘A few days later I met the man with a middle-aged woman, probably his wife, and he gave me a pleading look.’

‘Did you and Jef share the proceeds?’

‘Of course. He was the one who had given me the idea.’

‘And Juliette?’

‘I don’t know. I think he would have liked her to walk the streets. She didn’t want to. They argue all the time. Often he left me alone with her. She undressed in front of me, even when he was there. They weren’t at all embarrassed around me.’

‘And that’s how it happened?’

‘Yes. Almost without my noticing. I didn’t have many opportunities, for want of money.’

‘What did van Damme live on?’

‘He didn’t tell me about his business affairs. He hung out in shady bars around Porte Saint-Denis. He went to the races a lot. Sometimes he had some money in his pocket, other times not.’

‘Was he suspicious of you?’

‘He called me the First Communicant.’

‘Why did you leave their flat?’

‘Because I couldn’t stay there for ever, especially after what had happened with Juliette. I went to all the addresses in the classified ads. I started selling encyclopedias. At first it went quite well, and I moved into Mademoiselle Clément’s.’

‘Who gave you her address?’

‘It was just by chance, going from door to door, that I saw the sign. I went in and she immediately seemed to be interested in me.’

‘Did she buy an encyclopedia from you?’

‘No. She showed me the free room, and I moved in that evening. She’s always been kind to me. She’s very good. She’s nice to everyone. I owe her three months’ rent, and she’s never thrown me out. Quite the opposite, you know what she’s done.’

‘There’s never been anything between you?’

‘Never, word of honour.’

‘You’ve never tried?’

Paulus looked at him with genuine astonishment.

‘She’s over forty!’

‘Obviously! Have you told her everything you’ve just told me?’

‘Not everything.’

‘Van Damme and Juliette?’

‘Yes. Not the story about the man from the provinces. Van Damme sometimes came to see me, and he occasionally slept in my room, on days when he had argued with his wife. We were both trying to find a way of making some quick money.’

‘Why?’

‘I’ve already explained. Jef wanted to go to Belgium and from there apply for papers for the United States.’

‘Abandoning his wife and son?’

‘Yes. I thought if I had a little money in front of me I’d come up with an interesting scheme.’

‘Wasn’t it also a bit about paying for prostitutes?’

‘I’d have liked to do that, of course.’

‘Did you know it was because of the one you met one evening at the Stork that we found you?’

‘It doesn’t surprise me. She wasn’t very nice. She was quick to turn me out, and afterwards she hurried to a bar that was still open, hoping to find a better customer.’

He said that without rancour, but with a hint of bitterness. Unprompted, he went on:

‘Jef and I had read a story in the paper about a “hold-up”, as they say, which brought in three million. Some masked young men had attacked a debt collector. The article explained why there wasn’t any chance of tracking them down.’

‘So you thought about a debt collector?’

‘Not for very long. They’re almost always armed. But I remembered the Stork, where the till is near the door and where there’s never anyone after two in the morning.’

‘Who got hold of the car?’

‘Jef. I can’t drive.’

‘Did he steal it?’

‘He took it from a street corner, and afterwards we abandoned it a few streets away.’

‘Did Jef have a gun?’

Paulus didn’t hesitate.

‘Yes.’

‘Do you know the make?’

‘I often saw it at his place. It was a little automatic made in

Belgium, at the national factory in Herstal.'

'He didn't have another one?'

'I'm sure of it.'

'There was no question of using it for the Stork job?'

'I was against it.'

'Why?'

'So that it would be less serious if we were caught.'

The internal telephone rang, and Maigret picked up. It was Lucas, announcing that he was back from the Ile Saint-Louis. Maigret looked Paulus in the eyes and asked him:

'You're not going to try and escape, are you?'

'What good would it do me?'

He left him alone in his office while he went to see Lucas.

'Van Damme?' he asked.

'He vanished five days ago. His wife doesn't know what's become of him. She'd been expecting him to abandon her for some time. Things were going quite badly at home. They have a child.'

'What kind of woman is she?'

'A worn-out little thing, the kind you meet by the thousand. It seemed to me that she had tuberculosis.'

'Has she got any money?'

'Not a cent.'

'What does she live on?'

Maigret understood Lucas' look and his sigh.

'Did you find anything in the flat?'

Lucas set down a Belgian automatic on the desk. Paulus hadn't been lying. It plainly wasn't the gun that had been used to shoot Janvier. If van Damme hadn't taken it with him, it was because he expected to cross the border, where he risked being searched.

'She hasn't an idea where he might be?'

'She thinks he's gone back to Belgium. He talked about it several times. He felt a bit lost in Paris, where they laughed at his accent.'

Lucas held out a passport photograph, showing a fair-haired man with an almost square face and a protruding jaw, staring straight ahead like a soldier at attention. He looked more like a hitman from La Villette than a café waiter.

'Pass that on to the Belgian police. They'll probably find him roaming around the United States consulate.'

'What does your kid say?'

'Everything.'

‘Was it him?’

‘He didn’t shoot Janvier.’

‘His father’s just arrived. He’s in the waiting room.’

‘What’s he like?’

‘An accountant, or a cashier. What do you want me to do with him?’

‘Keep him waiting.’

Maigret went back into his room, where he found Paulus leaning against the window.

‘Can I have another cigarette? I don’t suppose you’ve got a glass of water?’

‘Sit down. Your father’s here.’

‘Are you going to force me to see him?’

He had been calm until then; now there was panic in his eyes.

‘Are you afraid of him? Is he severe?’

‘No. It’s not that.’

‘So?’

‘He doesn’t understand. It’s not his fault. He’s bound to be upset … Please …! Don’t bring him in now …’

‘You know what to expect?’

‘How long will I be put in jail for?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I haven’t killed anyone. It was a toy gun. I haven’t even spent my share of the money. You must have found it.’

He had said it quite naturally: ‘my share’.

‘You could still be looking at five years. And after that you’ll be sent to the African Battalions.’

That didn’t trouble him. He was only worried about the impending meeting with his father.

He wasn’t trying to inspire pity. He didn’t understand why Maigret, who had no child, who would have loved to have a son, was looking at him anxiously.

What kind of man would he be, what future would he have, when he came out of the African Battalions – if he ever did come back?

‘You’re an idiot, Paulus!’ Maigret sighed. ‘If I knew your father would give you a good slap I’d bring him in right away.’

‘He’s never beaten me in my life.’

‘Shame.’

‘He cries. It’s worse!’

‘I’m sending you to the cells. Do you know a lawyer?’

‘No.’

‘Your father will probably appoint one. Come this way …’

‘Aren’t we going to see him?’

‘No. Put out your cigarette.’

And Maigret handed him over to Lucas, who was in charge of formalities.

The half-hour with his father was even more unpleasant. As Paulus had expected, he cried. And Maigret couldn’t bear to see a man crying either.

‘We’ve bent over backwards, inspector …’

But of course! But of course! Maigret wasn’t accusing anyone. Everybody was doing their best. Unfortunately they couldn’t do much. Otherwise the Police Judiciaire probably wouldn’t exist.

It remained the case that Janvier had been shot down on the pavement of Rue Lhomond, and that it was up to Maigret to find the perpetrator.

To distract himself he went to have lunch with Lucas at the Brasserie Dauphine, where they sat on the terrace, at a table covered with a red checked tablecloth. It was the first time that year that he had eaten outside. He was distracted, preoccupied. Lucas, who sensed as much, hesitated before asking him:

‘Are you sure those two have nothing to do with the Janvier case, chief?’

‘I’m sure of it. Wait and see, they’ll find van Damme in Brussels, where he went as soon as he had some money in his pocket. As for Paulus, once the job was done he holed up in the house on Rue Lhomond and wouldn’t have come out for anything in the world. He felt safe at Mademoiselle Clément’s. He would have lived there for months if he’d been able to. He would only have had one reason to shoot at Janvier: to leave the way open for him to escape. But he didn’t escape. And I believe Mademoiselle Clément when she says that he was under the bed when the shot was fired, and that she was in her room.’

‘So?’

‘Nothing. I’ve just gone through Janvier’s desk again. I’ve examined every last piece of paper and reread the files on all the cases he’d been dealing with. It could have been an act of revenge.’

But then again! It’s very rare for a criminal to take revenge on a policeman, even if he’s had him arrested. But Maigret intended to leave no stone unturned.

‘I’ve also got hold of the list of everyone who’s recently got out of prison. There’s not a single one who’s been arrested by Janvier or his deputy.’

‘Are you going to go back there?’

‘There’ clearly referred to Mademoiselle Clément’s house.

Maigret didn’t answer straight away. He ate in silence, watching the shadows of the people walking along the pavement.

‘Who knew that Janvier would be on guard that night, on Rue Lhomond?’

He was asking himself the question. It was Lucas who answered.

‘I didn’t even know,’ he said. ‘He arranged things as he wanted to with Vauquelin and the other inspectors.’

‘It’s hard to believe that someone would have gone down Rue Lhomond by chance, recognized Janvier and, for some reason, shot him. That person couldn’t have approached him so silently that Janvier didn’t even hear him arriving.’

‘I’m beginning to understand what you’re getting at.’

‘It wasn’t Janvier in person that they were after, that’s the essential point. *It was the inspector who was on duty that evening, on the pavement of Rue Lhomond*. Vauquelin, or anyone at all, would have been shot in the same way.’

‘Unless they mistook Janvier for someone else?’

Maigret shrugged. He hesitated before ordering a glass of spirits with his coffee, and finally, in an act of protest against the previous day’s chartreuse, he asked for a calvados.

‘I’m going back to see Janvier. The doctor might let him speak now.’

‘Can I come with you? I’d like to say hello.’

They went together. Madame Janvier hadn’t arrived yet. They didn’t have long to wait. This time, the inspector almost had a real beard, and he was more clear-eyed.

‘Don’t get him too worked up. The doctor allows him to say a few words in a low voice, but he has to remain calm.’

Maigret straddled a chair, an unlit pipe in his mouth, while Lucas leaned against the window-sill.

‘We’ve arrested Paulus. Don’t say anything. I’ll fill you in briefly. He was hiding under Mademoiselle Clément’s bed.’

And, as Janvier’s face expressed a kind of shame, Maigret added:

‘Don’t worry. I wouldn’t have thought of looking under that woman’s bed. Paulus is a choirboy. He wasn’t the one who shot at

you; neither was his accomplice, a Belgian who has made himself scarce. Don't move. Don't talk. Wait for me to ask some questions and take the time to think.'

Janvier gave a sign that he had understood.

'I've thought of one possibility, although it's not one I believe in. Imagine that in this case, or some other case, you had found a clue that might compromise someone, and that someone might have had the idea of killing you.'

Janvier didn't move for a long time.

'You'd done a few stakeouts in front of the house. Did you notice anything unusual?'

'Nothing that's not in the report.'

Someone came to announce that Madame Janvier was here. This time she was allowed to spend a few minutes alone with her husband. She was embarrassed, in front of Maigret, of the bunch of violets she was holding.

'Don't worry, son. We'll find him sooner or later.'

Once he was outside with Lucas, he seemed less optimistic.

'Someone shot Janvier. That's a fact. The bullet didn't fire itself, and somewhere there's a bastard who pulled the trigger.'

'Do you believe he's still on Rue Lhomond?'

Maigret didn't believe anything at all. He hadn't a clue. He was in a bad mood, and even spring no longer brought him any pleasure.

'You can go back to headquarters. If anything happens, call me.'

'At Mademoiselle Clément's?'

At such moments the chief inspector was touchier than usual. He glared at Lucas, as if he thought he was trying to be funny.

'At Mademoiselle Clément's, yes!'

And, stuffing his pipe, he trudged heavily towards Rue Lhomond.

'I was wondering if you'd come back.'

'Well, I've come back.'

'Have you put him in jail?'

'Of course.'

'Are you angry?'

'With whom?'

'With me.'

She didn't realize either. She stood there, more of a china doll than ever, smiling at him shyly, but she was no more troubled than that.

‘You realize what you’ve done?’

‘I don’t think he’s a bad boy. He has a good heart.’

‘I should still charge you with concealing a criminal.’

‘Do you plan to do that?’

It was almost as if she was amused, that she wanted to go to jail too, the way other people want to see Nice.

‘I don’t know yet.’

‘Why don’t you sit down?’

He had no reason to go on standing in the sitting room, in fact. It was ridiculous. But he was angry with the fat woman, without really knowing why. He was sulking.

‘Are you hiding something from me?’

‘I can assure you that there’s no one left under my bed, if that’s what you mean. Nor in the wardrobes. You can search the house.’

‘Are you mocking me, Mademoiselle Clément?’

‘I wouldn’t be so presumptuous, Monsieur Maigret.’

‘Why are you smiling?’

‘Because I think life is funny.’

‘And if my inspector had been killed, would that be funny too? He has a wife and two children, he’s expecting a third.’

‘I hadn’t thought about that.’

‘What were you thinking about?’

‘About you.’

He couldn’t find an answer. She was as candid, in her way, as that little fool Paulus.

‘Will you come upstairs?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you want a cup of coffee?’

‘No, thanks.’

But he didn’t go up straight away, and, remembering how thirsty he had been during the night, he went to the bistro opposite, where he had three glasses of beer one after the other, feeling as if he were getting his own back.

‘Did you find him?’ the Auvergnat asked.

Maigret shot back:

‘Who?’

And the man chose not to press the matter.

This was a stretch of ordinary street, almost no passers-by, two pavements, some houses, a few hundred people who lived in these houses, men who left in the morning and came back in the evening,

women doing their housework, children squealing, old men taking some fresh air at their windows or in their doorways.

There was a big girl with a child's face playing at keeping a rooming house, an old ham who gave singing lessons to little girls yearning for opera, a student dying of hunger and fighting against sleep in the hope of being able to hang a doctor or dentist's plaque on his door; there was a lazy little slut who read novels all day in bed, where she received an old gentleman three times a week, and a young typist who was brought home at night in a taxi; there were the Lotards with their baby, the Safts, who were expecting one; Monsieur Kridelka, who looked like a baddie from a film and was probably the gentlest man in the world. There were …

Good people, as Mademoiselle Clément said. People like there are everywhere, who had to find enough money to eat every day, and enough money to pay their rent every month.

There were the neighbours: a man who had left home in the morning with the suitcase of a travelling salesman, a woman shaking her duster out of the window, and someone right at the top, under the roof, who kept the light on late into the night.

What would he have found, going through the street with a fine-tooth comb? A majority of what are called honest people, in all likelihood. No rich people. A few poor ones. The odd shady character too, probably.

But the murderer?

The Auvergnat frowned as he heard Maigret, still holding his glass of beer, distractedly ordering:

'A white wine.'

Perhaps he had forgotten that he had just had three glasses of beer? Perhaps he thought it didn't count, that it was just the arrears of the night before? Perhaps, quite simply, he was thinking about something else?

The barman preferred to say nothing, hurried to pick up the bottle and filled a stemmed glass.

When Maigret crossed the street a little later, he watched after him, shaking his head, and muttered:

'He's a strange one!'

Because we're all strange in someone's eyes.

5.

In which Maigret takes copious notes to make himself believe that he's working, and Mademoiselle Clément doesn't always prove charitable

She must have done it on purpose. It was her way of waging a kind of little war. While she might have been surprisingly light on her feet for her size, she had no reason to climb two storeys when she could easily have called up to him from the bottom of the stairs.

Was it to stress that he was a heavy sleeper? In the morning, perhaps. Madame Maigret teased him about it too. But it wasn't the case when he snoozed during the day. And yet, after knocking at the door, she opened it straight away, catching him fully dressed on his bed.

'I beg your pardon. I thought you were busy working. You're wanted on the telephone.'

She wasn't being mean. On the contrary. She looked at him with eyes that sparkled with good humour and even with affection.

It was a matter between the two of them, which other people couldn't understand. Maigret refused to talk to her. It was as simple as that. It had been going on for two days now. He left the house and came back at least ten times a day. Each time he did so she made sure that she appeared in front of him, with a pout that seemed to say:

'So, friends again?'

And yet he pretended not to see her, or responded to her overtures with a grunt.

For two days it had also been raining, with the occasional ray of sunlight that pierced the clouds.

'Hello! It's me, yes …'

'Do you remember someone called Meyer, chief?'

He was sure that she was listening to him, from the sitting room

or the kitchen, and it was perhaps for her benefit that he gruffly replied:

'There must be ten pages of Meyers in the phone book.'

'The cashier from Boulevard des Italiens who scarpered. We've just had some information about him. The Dutch police found him in Amsterdam, with a young red-haired woman. What should we do?'

It also seemed that he was deliberately staying away from Quai des Orfèvres. The house on Rue Lhomond had become something like a branch of the Police Judiciaire, and even the big chief himself sometimes had to contact Maigret by telephone.

'Is that you, Maigret? The examining magistrate is calling me about the Piercot case …'

And no sooner had he hung up than Maigret seemed to immerse himself once again with voluptuous delight in the atmosphere of his little stretch of street.

The cleaning woman with the men's shoes was afraid of him, God knows why, and quickly got out of his way as soon as she heard his footsteps. The others also looked at him with a degree of embarrassment, indeed a certain unease, as if they felt that suspicions might fall on them at the drop of a hat.

It was only Mademoiselle Clément, in fact, who didn't take him seriously, and who smiled at him with the certainty that sooner or later his mask would fall.

She discreetly paid him attention in lots of tiny ways. In the morning, without being asked, she set a cup of coffee down outside his door as soon as she heard him getting up. In the evening there was always a bottle of beer on the table in the little sitting room, where he always ended up on one pretext or another.

If he had been asked what he was doing there, he would probably have replied that he had no idea, that he didn't know what was going on, and that he had nearly had enough; and Madame Maigret, on the other end of the line – because she was still in Alsace – adopted an attitude not dissimilar to that of Mademoiselle Clément.

It wasn't something that happened often, but he had taken lots of notes. When he questioned people, he took his big black notebook out of his pocket, a notebook that closed with an elastic band, and wrote down what he was told.

Then, in his room, when he was fed up with looking out of the window, he sat down at the table and copied out his notes. It was

probably pointless, he knew. It was a kind of discipline, or perhaps a way of punishing himself for God knows what.

As soon as a curtain stirred in one of the houses opposite, he went and stood at the window, which he had to keep closed, because the rain had brought a chill that made you want to light a fire.

> Eugène Lotard. – 32, born in Saint-Étienne. Son of a railwayman. Insurance agent at La Nationale. Married for three years to Rosalie, née Méchin, born in Benouville, near Étretat (Seine-Inférieure).
> Blanche Dubut. – 22, born in La Châtaigneraie (Vendée). Theatrical artiste. Unmarried.

It was all desperately ordinary. These people had come to Paris, from every corner of France and even Europe, and ended up in Mademoiselle Clément's house.

Kridelka was waiting for his naturalization papers, even though he spoke terrible French. Saft had his already.

He had questioned them all already, some of them several times. He had gone into their rooms, seen their beds, their toothbrushes above the washstand and the little alcohol or paraffin stoves on which they prepared most of their meals.

He had found out the most intimate details of their lives, looking at them with those big eyes of his, which assumed a bleak expression at such times.

And after that? Nowhere, of course, not in the cupboards, on top of the furniture or under mattresses, had he found the Colt revolver with which Janvier had been shot.

Poor Janvier! Maigret wasn't even going to see him in hospital any more, he just called the nurse twice a day, and sometimes the phone was passed to the wounded man, who said hello to him in an unrecognizable voice. For how long would he go on making that unpleasant whistling sound as he spoke?

Faces he had never seen three days before had become so familiar to him that afterwards he would probably find himself greeting simple passers-by, mistaking them for friends.

The woman with the duster, for example, looked at his window almost as often as he looked at hers, with a reproachful air, as if giving him to understand that a big, strong man should have been doing more serious work.

She was a widow, Madame Boulard, whose husband had been in the Highways Department, and who lived on a small pension.

In a block of six houses, he had already counted five widows. He saw them in the morning, shopping bags on their arms, on their way to the market on Rue Mouffetard. He saw them coming back with leeks or lettuces poking out.

He could almost have said what everyone ate, at what time, when and how they went to bed, at what time their alarm-clocks went off on their bedside tables.

On the first floor, opposite, the bed had been moved slightly, bringing it closer to the window. It was the room which a man had left one morning with a suitcase, to be driven by taxi to Gare Montparnasse.

Often, at night, at irregular hours, the light came on, but he saw no shadow on the blind.

The woman was ill. She spent whole days in bed. The concierge went up at about ten o'clock in the morning, opened the window and started doing the housework.

As to the attic window, the maid of an old woman of private means – another widow – slept there and received men every night.

He had resumed Vauquelin's work again, had gone to question them all, all the neighbours, everyone who might have seen or heard something. To do that, he was forced to knock on their doors at meal times, or in the evening after dinner. He had interviewed some of them twice.

'I've already told the inspector what I knew,' they told him.

He sat down anyway, whether he was invited to or not. It was an old trick. When people see you sitting down, they lose all hope of getting rid of you in a few minutes and try to give you satisfaction.

'What were you doing last Monday at ten o'clock in the evening?'

He added:

'On the evening when a shot was fired in the street.'

They were impressed by his fat notebook. Most of them scoured their memories.

'I was getting ready to go to bed.'

'Were your windows shut?'

'I think so … Wait …'

'The weather was very mild.'

'If I remember, one of the windows was half open.'

It was a task that called for patience. He brought Vauquelin's notes with him. Sometimes it worked, sometimes not.

Three times he had started drawing up a kind of timetable, to

which he constantly added corrections.

Then he went and had a glass of white wine or a bite to eat at the Auvergnat's bistro, and in the end he got to know the locals. He was now treated like a regular customer. In the morning he was told what would be on the menu, and the owner's wife, with her hair in a bun on the top of her head, added:

'Unless you want a special little dish …'

Most of the time he didn't take the trouble to put on his overcoat. He turned up the collar of his jacket, lowered the brim of his hat and crossed the street, his back bent. When he went to question certain women like that, they stared insistently at his feet to remind him of the doormat.

'You're certain you didn't hear any footsteps?'

His last summary, on Friday at four o'clock in the afternoon, when he was coming back from having a glass at the Auvergnat's bistro, was more or less as follows. He had reread it so many times, pencil in hand, that he had drawn squiggles, like the ones in the margin of a schoolboy's exercise book.

Clément house. Twenty past ten (a few moments after the shot).

Mademoiselle Clément is in her room, having her evening wash, and Paulus is under the bed.

On the ground floor, on the left, M. Valentin is making himself a hot rum in his kitchen as he does almost every evening.

On the first floor, the Lotards have gone to bed. Madame Lotard hasn't gone to sleep, because the baby has just groaned and she's waiting to find out whether she will have to get up again.

Blanche Dubut is reading in her bed.

Fachin absent (studying with a friend; will not return until the morning).

M. Mège, accountant, whose window overlooks the courtyard like Fachin's, is sitting on his bed, cutting his toenails.

Second floor. No one in Paulus' room. Kridelka absent. Will come back a quarter of an hour later. He has gone to a public meeting. (Checked by Inspector Vacher.)

Mademoiselle Isabelle, absent. (Cinema, impossible to check. Tells the story, without hesitation, of the film that she is supposed to have gone to see.)

M. and Mme Saft. She, in bed. He, in an armchair, busy reading the newspaper.

Other pages like that summed up the timetables of the tenants of the neighbouring houses.

Then, at last, on a different sheet, there was a reconstruction, as precise as possible, of people's movements at the time of the

gunshot and immediately afterwards.

This in particular was noticeably different from Vauquelin's report, probably because the people in question had had time to remember.

One fact seemed certain: no one had heard any noises before the shot.

'You didn't hear the inspector's footsteps?'

'No. I had seen him a little earlier when I was closing my window. I didn't know he was an inspector. He was young, and I thought he was waiting for his girlfriend.'

That was the lady with the duster.

Monsieur Valentin had also noticed Janvier as he was closing his window, before moving to the kitchen, but that was at about ten o'clock. He hadn't wondered what he was doing there.

So the shot rang out in the silence of the deserted street.

Blanche Dubut, it seemed, had been the first to run to her window, which was half open with the curtains closed. She had parted them.

'Did you see light at other windows?'

'I wonder if there were any at the window opposite. There are almost always lights at that time of day. First of all I looked into the street.'

The window opposite was that of the flat of the man who had left with a suitcase, where a sick or invalid woman lived.

'Did other windows open?'

'Yes. All over the place.'

'Were any of them open before you opened yours?'

'I don't think so. I think I was the first person to see the body on the pavement and scream.'

That was true. At least four people had heard her cry, including Monsieur Saft, who had run to the landing, thinking that she was calling for help.

'Who was first into the street?'

In all likelihood it was Monsieur Valentin, who was wearing a black velvet smoking jacket. The concierge of the house next door had come out at almost the same time.

Maigret had asked the same question a hundred times:

'Which windows were lit at that moment?'

But things immediately became confused. Most of the windows, in short, had opened one after the other. Mademoiselle Clément

hadn't even come out of her front door. She had asked:

'Is he wounded?'

And, without wasting a moment, she had rushed to the telephone to call the police.

'How much time passed between the shot and the moment when Monsieur Valentin left the house?'

'Less than half a minute. A few seconds.'

The kitchen was beside his bedroom, and it was the only room he had had to cross. He had even forgotten to turn off the gas and had come back in a few moments later to do it.

And yet neither Valentin nor the others had heard footsteps. The murderer hadn't had time to get out of sight. He would have had to pass beneath at least one streetlight, and no one had seen anything.

They didn't look like much, but these few certainties were the result of a considerable number of interrogations.

The concierge of the house opposite, Madame Keller, did everything she could to help Maigret, but she was the kind of lively little woman who speaks very quickly and who, by trying to be precise, gets everything muddled.

'Did you leave your house?'

'I went and stood in the doorway, but I didn't cross the street. I thought he was dead, and I don't like seeing dead people.'

'Did any of your tenants go outside?'

'Monsieur Piedboeuf, from the second floor, the one who has a beard and works at Bon Marché, came down in his dressing gown, and he went and glanced at the pavement opposite. I even told him he would catch a cold.'

'Did you see the police car arrive?'

'Yes … No … That is, just as it turned the corner I was in my bedroom, where I went to get my coat …'

Maigret had phoned the station of the Fifth Ar-rondissement four or five times to ask questions of the policemen who had come to the scene.

According to them, there were about twenty people on the pavement in a circle around Janvier when they had arrived. They had only taken a few names, at random. Monsieur Valentin had given his without being asked. They had all noticed fat Mademoiselle Clément.

'You didn't notice which windows were lit?'

No one had paid any attention.

‘And you didn’t notice whether anyone was running off in the direction of either of the two ends of the street?’

It was confused. Some neighbours had come over to the initial group, had mingled with it, sometimes giving their advice, while others headed home. Two or three passers-by had also stopped.

It didn’t seem to be leading anywhere. It was bleak, like the rain that fell constantly and which filled the house with damp. There was a fire only in the sitting room, and Maigret went and sat there from time to time, responding with grunts to Mademoiselle Clément’s overtures.

They had had no trouble finding van Damme in Brussels because, as Paulus had told them, his first concern on getting there had been to go to the United States consulate, to the information service.

He had initially denied any involvement in the Stork case, then, with his back to the wall, he had shifted all responsibility to Paulus. One established fact was that he was in Brussels on the night when Janvier had been shot in Rue Lhomond. They had found the woman he had taken to the cinema that evening. Then he had been seen with her in a working men’s restaurant on Rue des Bouchers.

‘You’re wanted on the phone, Monsieur Maigret.’

It had become a game. She climbed the two storeys every time, as if for fun, and glanced with amusement at the pages he was scribbling on.

It was the Police Judiciaire again, asking for information about a current case. Lucas had taken his place there in his absence. Once or twice a day he came to Rue Lhomond to ask him to sign papers.

He didn’t ask any questions and avoided giving Maigret his superior questioning looks.

Maigret crossed the street once again, and first went to have a glass of white wine before going into the house opposite.

‘Tell me, Madame Keller …’

‘I’m listening …’

Her little lodge was very clean, but dark. A big stove roared, and Maigret automatically presented his back to it.

‘The first-floor tenant …’

‘Yes, Monsieur Boursicault … We always call him Monsieur Désiré … That’s his first name …’

‘You told me he worked for Les Chargeurs Réunis, a shipping company.’

‘For over twenty years. He’s a steward on one of their boats.’

‘Do you know which one?’

‘He changes from time to time. For a year, it’s been the *Asie*.’

‘When I saw him leaving with his suitcase in the morning, I suppose he was going back on board?’

‘Right now he’s en route for Pointe-Noire, in Equatorial Africa. He’s hardly ever in France. They take more than a month to get there, and the same to come back.’

‘So that he comes back about every two months?’

‘Yes.’

‘For a long time?’

‘It depends. It’s quite complicated. He explained the rotation system to me, but I didn’t understand.’

‘I suppose that when he’s in Paris it’s for a few weeks?’

‘No. That’s just it. Only one time in two. Then he has almost a month off. Other times, he just has time to come and kiss his wife, collect his things and set off again.’

‘Was his last stay a month-long stay?’

‘No. He stayed for two nights.’

Maigret didn’t get excited. Ten times, when questioning someone, he had thought he was about to reach a result, and then a very simple answer dashed his hopes.

‘You say two nights? Wait. He would have arrived on the evening when the inspector was wounded?’

‘That’s right, yes. It didn’t occur to me to mention it.’

‘A bit before the shot was fired?’

‘No. He hadn’t yet arrived home when the gun went off.’

‘A little after?’

‘A long time after. His train got into Gare Montparnasse at about midnight. When I opened the door to him, it was almost one o’clock in the morning.’

‘I suppose he came back in a taxi?’

‘He couldn’t have carried his suitcase.’

‘Was his wife waiting for him?’

‘Definitely. She always knows where he is. A boat is like a train. There’s a timetable. She sends him airmail letters to all his stopping points. I know better than anyone, because I’m the one who posts them.’

‘So she was waiting for him?’

‘Impatiently.’

‘They run a tidy household?’

‘It’s the best I’ve ever seen, even though they aren’t together often, because of Monsieur Désiré’s job.’

‘What kind of man is he?’

‘A good man, very gentle. He’s very patient. He retires in a year, and they’re going to live in the country.’

‘Is his wife ill?’

‘She’s barely left her bed for five years. She shouldn’t leave it at all, but when I’m not up there, sometimes she moves around the flat.’

‘What’s wrong with her?’

‘I don’t know exactly. It’s something to do with her legs. She’s half paralysed. Sometimes it looks as if she’s completely paralysed and she can’t move.’

‘Do you know if she has any family in Paris?’

‘No one.’

‘And no one ever comes to see her?’

‘Only me. I do her housework, as I’ve told you already. I go up several times a day to bring her meals to her and check that she doesn’t need anything.’

‘Why doesn’t her husband move to the country, or to Bordeaux, since he disembarks in Bordeaux?’

‘He’s suggested that. I think she’s used to me. There was also talk of putting her in a sanatorium, but she refused.’

‘You say she has no relatives?’

‘Désiré’s mother, who is very old and almost an invalid herself, comes to see her every month and brings her a box of chocolates every time. The poor woman doesn’t dare to admit that she doesn’t like chocolates and gives them to me for my daughter.’

‘Do you have anything else to tell me?’

‘What would there be to say? They’re good people, sorely tested. It isn’t easy for a man to have a wife who’s ill, and it isn’t easy for a woman …’

‘Tell me, Madame Keller, on the evening of the gunshot, didn’t you go up to your tenant’s flat?’

‘That’s right. I’d completely forgotten.’

‘When, exactly?’

‘Oh, a long time later. The young man had already been taken away in an ambulance. I crossed the street to see the place where he had fallen and hear what people were saying. There was blood on the pavement. I noticed light in Madame Boursicault’s window

and I thought immediately that the poor creature must be in a trance.'

'How long was it after the inspector was attacked?'

'At least half an hour. I don't remember exactly. I went upstairs. She wasn't asleep. I think she was waiting for me. She knew I would come to reassure her.'

'What did she say to you?'

'Nothing. I'm the one who told her what had happened.'

'She didn't get up?'

'I think she had gone to look out the window. The doctor tells her not to walk, but I've already said that she doesn't always obey.'

'Was she nervous?'

'No. She had bags under her eyes, as usual, because she barely sleeps, in spite of the drugs. I try to make her read, I bring her books, but she isn't interested. She spends hours thinking, all on her own.'

A quarter of an hour later Maigret, clutching the receiver, staring at the little poster above the spyhole, was in touch with Chargeurs Réunis.

Everything the concierge had told him about Boursicault was true. He was an excellent man who was highly regarded by the company. The *Asie* had reached Bordeaux just in time to take the train to Gare Montparnasse arriving a few minutes after midnight.

So he couldn't have shot Janvier.

Maigret had only just hung up when a voice announced above his head:

'Wouldn't you like to come up for a moment, inspector?'

It was Mademoiselle Blanche, who often left her door half opened, and who must have heard the conversation.

As regards Mademoiselle Blanche, something quite funny was happening. Since Maigret had been living in the house, her famous uncle had no longer dared to come and see her, so he must have been waiting more impatiently than anyone else for the inquiry to be over.

'I don't know if it's important, but I couldn't help hearing what you were saying on the telephone, and it gave me an idea.'

Her room was full of cigarette smoke. There were cakes on a plate, near the bed, which bore the indentation of a young woman's body. She was in her dressing gown, as always, and it was clear that she wasn't wearing anything underneath.

Her immodesty was calm and unpremeditated.

'Sit down. Forgive me for making you come upstairs. It's about the people opposite.'

Sitting on the edge of the bed with her legs crossed, she held out the plate of cakes.

'No, thank you.'

'Bear in mind that I don't know them and have never spoken to them. Except that I'm at home almost all day. From my bed, I can see through the window. I'm not particularly curious.'

It was true. She clearly wasn't interested in anyone but herself – and the characters in the novels that she devoured.

'And yet there's one detail that I've noticed, I don't know why. Some days their blind is up all day, and I can see the woman in her bed through the lace curtains.'

'And on other days?'

'On other days the blind stays lowered from morning till evening, and they don't even open the window to air the room.'

'Does that often happen?'

'Often enough for me to have been struck by it. The first time, I wondered if the woman was dead. Since I was used to seeing her in her bed … I talked about it to Mademoiselle Clément …'

'Was that a long time ago …?'

'Oh! Yes …'

'Months?'

'Longer. More than two years. It was a few weeks after I moved here. I was all the more surprised because it was the summer and, on the previous days, the windows had been wide open all day.'

'You don't know if that happens at regular intervals?'

'I didn't pay attention. But sometimes it lasts three days.'

'Have you ever seen anyone else in her room?'

'Only the concierge, every day, several times a day, sometimes an old woman, and her husband every now and again. When he's been there for several weeks, he's the one who does the housework, except the big clean on Saturday. I was forgetting the doctor, obviously.'

'Does the doctor go there often?'

'It depends what you mean by often. Perhaps once a month. I don't spend all my time looking through the window. If I hadn't heard you on the telephone, I wouldn't have thought about it. Do you think it's going to be useful to you? Bear in mind that I have

nothing bad to say about them. I've never spoken to them.'

'Would you think about it again? When you went to your window, after the shot was fired …'

'I know what you're thinking. I'm almost sure, now, that there was no light on opposite.'

'Was the blind lowered?'

'I don't think so. When it's lowered, it's a light patch, because it's an off-white blind. It seems to me, on the contrary, that the patch was black, like a window open on to an unlit room.'

Was Mademoiselle Clément going to sulk right back at him? When Maigret went downstairs, she avoided appearing as she usually did. Perhaps she was jealous of Mademoiselle Blanche.

'It's me again,' Maigret announced, entering Madame Keller's lodge.

'I was just going to bring Madame Boursicault her meal.'

She was just putting it on a tray.

'Does your tenant sometimes spend the whole day with the curtains drawn?'

'The whole day! Three or four days, more like it! I've had some fine quarrels with her …'

'What reason does she give you for living in semi-darkness?'

'You see, inspector, you shouldn't try to understand sick people. Sometimes I'm about to get angry. Then I put myself in her place and tell myself that I'd probably be worse than her. I think that sometimes she suffers from neurasthenia. I've talked to the doctor about it.'

'What did he say?'

'He told me not to worry. It takes her in bursts. At those times I could swear that she hates me. If she could lock herself away, she probably would. She doesn't just tell me to lower the blinds or lower them herself, she forbids me to tidy up. She claims to have a migraine, that the slightest sound, the slightest movement in the room drives her mad.'

'Does that happen often?'

'Unfortunately.'

'Does she eat anyway?'

'As usual. I'm just allowed to make her bed and dust the bedroom.'

'How many rooms are there in the flat?'

'Four, plus a box room and a toilet. There are two bedrooms, one

of which isn't used, a dining room and a sitting room, which isn't used either. They don't pay very much, because Monsieur Boursicault has been in the house for over twenty years. He was there even before I was.

'Her too?'

'They got married about fifteen years ago, when neither of them was young.'

'How old is she?'

'Forty-eight.'

'And him?'

'He will be sixty next year. He confessed as much when he told me he was about to retire and that the flat would be free.'

'You told me you were the one who posted Madame Boursicault's mail?'

'I don't "post" it. The postman collects it from the lodge in the course of his round.'

'Who does she write to?'

'Her husband. Sometimes her mother-in-law.'

'Is that all?'

'I've never seen any other letters.'

'Does she receive many?'

'From her husband, yes. The old lady never writes.'

'Anything else?'

'Rarely. Sometimes I've taken up an envelope with a typed address.'

'How many times?'

'Four or five. Otherwise, it's the gas company, or the electric, or advertising fliers.'

'Do they have a telephone?'

'He had one installed five years ago when she fell ill, so that she can call the doctor more easily in an emergency.'

'Would you mind not telling her I've asked you about her?'

'I've already spoken about it. Was that a mistake? I always try to give her some interesting gossip. I've talked to her about the questions you've been asking about everyone in the street. I joked that if her husband had come back a few hours earlier, he would have been a suspect. Please excuse me.'

'How did she react?'

'She didn't react. She looks very tired. I wouldn't be surprised if she started having one of her migraines today or the day after.'

‘You can take up her dinner. Tell her I would like to talk to her. Say I’ve questioned all the tenants and that I have two or three questions to ask her.’

‘Straight away?’

‘I’ll be back in a few minutes.’

He wanted to get a bit of fresh air, and particularly to go and have a glass of white wine at the Auvergnat’s bistro.

Behind the curtain of the sitting room opposite, Mademoiselle Clément was watching him, and he nearly stuck his tongue out at her.

6.

Concerning a defenceless woman in a bed and a detective chief inspector who grows fierce

Basically, he needed to give himself courage. Even during the days before, when he was disturbing peaceful households eating soup to ask them questions while staring at them with his big eyes, he was more uneasy than he wanted to appear.

And yet he knew Madame Boursicault from having spotted her through the window, just a bare arm on the first day, when her husband had left, then, the next day, her face and the shape of her thin body under the sheet.

She was an ageless creature now, with an emaciated face, colourless and lifeless, like saints are sometimes portrayed in religious paintings, and he awkwardly remembered the two or three occasions when their eyes had met across the street. Did she know who he was? Did she just think he was a new tenant at Mademoiselle Clément's? Had the concierge talked to her about him while she was doing her housekeeping?

He still had a sense of having made personal contact. Her pupils were small and dark, and they were where all her vital strength seemed to be concentrated.

'You're a big, strong man, you're in good shape, you can come and go in the street, and here you are, leaning on a window, studying a poor, sick woman as if she were an exciting spectacle …!'

Maybe that wasn't what she was thinking at all. In all likelihood it only existed in Maigret's imagination.

Still, it was unpleasant, and he flinched as he climbed towards her flat, giving her time to finish the meal that the concierge had brought her. Madame Keller must, while cleaning, have told her his

visit was of little importance, a mere matter of routine.

She was probably going to tidy the place up a little, change the sheets, the pillow-cases.

'Same again!' he said.

He ordered the same thing three times in a row and only left the bistro when he felt a certain warmth in his throat and his head. On the opposite pavement he saw Mademoiselle Isabelle coming back and giving him a cheerful smile. She looked healthy, full of vitality, of …

Where were his thoughts taking him? He stuffed his pipe. Then he put it in his pocket, remembering that he was going to see a sick person, and frowned at the thought that he might not be able to smoke for some time.

He climbed the stairs and knocked at the door, which showed a chink of light at the bottom, even though it was still daylight outside.

'Come in!'

It was the concierge. She opened the door to him. The tray rested on a chair with a red velvet seat. Only half of the soup had been eaten, and a kind of purée had been poked with the tip of the fork.

'I'm sorry for bothering you, Madame Boursicault …'

He hadn't been mistaken. Clean sheets had been put on, and the woman's nightdress had been changed. Madame Keller had even done her hair. Her brown hair, mixed with grey, still bore the trace of the comb.

She was sitting in her bed and, with a bony hand, she pointed to an armchair by her bedside.

'I have to go back downstairs, Madame Françoise. I will come and say goodnight to you when the inspector has finished with you. Most importantly, let me say it again: don't worry.'

She spoke to her with that lightness that people affect when talking to the dying, and Maigret was surprised to find himself doing the same.

'There's no reason to worry,' he reassured her. 'You will be aware that a crime has been committed in the street, outside your window. I have questioned all the neighbours, some of them several times, because it's important to reconstruct the facts as precisely as possible.'

She hadn't yet opened her mouth. She looked at him gravely, as some children who are said to be too old for their age look at

grown-ups.

'Madame Keller told me you wouldn't mind receiving me …'

Then she said her first words.

'You can smoke your pipe.'

She must have seen him at his window, smoking his pipe all day.

'My husband smokes too. It doesn't bother me.'

And as he continued to hesitate:

'Please …'

Perhaps because of that, he felt obliged to give her long explanations.

'In an inquiry of this kind, the hardest thing is to establish everyone's comings and goings with certainty. Not because people lie, but because their memories are almost always imprecise. It has occurred to me that a person who only perceives the outside world from their bed must register some details more precisely than everyone else. I suppose, Madame Boursicault, that you were in bed when the shot was fired?'

'Yes, inspector. I get up so rarely! If I listened to them, I would never get up. I barely do so except in secret.'

She spoke slowly, in an unmodulated voice which gave her words a bleak tone.

'You were waiting for your husband that night, isn't that so?'

'I knew he would be back at around one in the morning.'

'And yet you had gone to sleep?'

'I wasn't sleeping. I'd just turned the light out. After a while light tires me.'

'Was your window closed?'

'I think it was half open. Probably a few centimetres.'

'Was the blind down?'

'Probably. I don't remember.'

'Did you hear the gunshot?'

'How would I not have heard it?'

'Did you know straight away that it was a gunshot?'

'There were no cars going down the street. So it couldn't have been a tyre blowing.'

'You didn't hear footsteps beforehand?'

'No.'

'Not the sound of a door or window being opened or closed?'

'Not before, but afterwards. The neighbours looked out of their windows. Someone came out of the house opposite.'

‘Just a moment. Immediately after the bang, weren’t there any hurried footsteps?’

‘I think there were.’

‘You’re not sure?’

‘No.’

‘You didn’t get up?’

‘Not straight away.’

‘But you did get up?’

‘When I heard a murmur of voices on the pavement opposite.’

‘Did you turn on the light?’

She seemed to think.

‘No. I certainly didn’t do that. I was in my nightdress, and some of the windows opposite were lit. I wouldn’t have shown myself.’

‘What did you see?’

‘Several people were standing around the body. Others were arriving.’

‘Did you stay at the window for a long time?’

‘Until a police car arrived.’

‘So you didn’t see or hear anything that could help me with my inquiry?’

‘I’m sorry, inspector. Madame Keller came upstairs a little later to tell me what was happening. I didn’t confess that I’d gone to the window, because she would have told me off.’

It was hot in the stuffy room. Maigret was sitting uncomfortably in an armchair that was too low for him and, out of a kind of modesty, he was smoking only in very small puffs.

‘Can I ask you how old you are, madame?’

‘Forty-eight. I’ve only been married for fifteen years. You can see that I was already what they call an old maid.’

She glanced towards an enlarged portrait facing the bed, above the fireplace, which showed her in a wedding dress on the arm of a man who was taller than she was, older, serious-looking, even a bit solemn.

‘Is that your husband?’

‘Yes. He was a widower. His first wife died of pneumonia after seven years of marriage.’

She added in a slightly muffled voice:

‘She died in this room, in this bed. They had no children.’

From then on Maigret didn’t have to ask any questions; she seemed to be telling her long story for her own benefit,

monotonously, like a running tap.

She didn't look at him; she stared at a point in space in front of her, and there were silences while she got her breath back.

'You see, Boursicault is the best man on earth. Everyone will tell you that, at Chargeurs, where they adore him. He joined them at the age of sixteen, as a runner, and he made it all by himself, by studying, by making sacrifices. His parents were poor and lived in Bordeaux. His father was a drunk whose wife had to go from police station to police station trying to find him every Saturday.

'That's why he's always had such a horror of drink. I feel awkward about not being able to offer you anything. There is never a drop of alcohol, not even of wine, in the house.

'I think that at first he feared he would inherit it, and that's why he stuck to such extremely strict rules …'

Maigret opened his mouth, but she didn't give him time to speak again, and he resigned himself to listening to the rest.

'Some people make fun of him, especially on board the boats, where they drink a lot. He doesn't gamble, he doesn't chase women. On board, he spends his evenings in his cabin reading and working. He has learned five or six languages all by himself, and he speaks several local dialects fluently.'

The furniture was old, like all the objects that decorated the room. Because of the daylight coming in from outside, the electric light looked drearier and gave the surroundings a muted, dusty appearance.

He had come to ask precise questions and he was being subjected to interminable confidences.

'I met him when he was in Paris between two boats, because even after he was widowed he came back to Paris, where he had kept his flat.'

'Doesn't his mother live in Paris?'

She wasn't surprised that he was aware of this.

'Yes! He brought her here a long time ago, during his first marriage. She's always complied with his needs, because he's an only child. He moved her into a rented flat on Rue des Tournelles. He adores his mother. She's very old, now. She still comes to see me from time to time, and those are her only outings, as it were.'

'Why didn't she come and live with you?'

'She was the one who didn't want to. She claims it always goes badly, that every household needs its independence.'

‘Do you get on well with her?’

‘I love her as much as if she were my mother. When I met Boursicault I was a saleswoman in a gentleman’s outfitters on Boulevard Saint-Michel. He came in to buy some socks and black ties. Even though he didn’t woo me, I saw that he was looking at me attentively, as if he was struck by something in me. I learned later what it was that had moved him so much. He didn’t try to hide it from me. Apparently I am the image of his first wife. Go over to the fireplace. There’s a little photograph of her on the left, in the mahogany frame.’

Sighing, Maigret got to his feet and looked dutifully at a bad photograph of an ordinary-looking young woman with a sad smile, as if she guessed that she would die young.

He was sorry to have come. He was drowning in all this greyness, it made him want to go outside and breathe the invigorating air. When he sat down in his armchair again, his eyelids felt heavy.

‘I didn’t see him for almost three months. I didn’t know what his job was. He was on one of his trips to Equatorial Africa. When he came back, he asked me if I fancied going out with him. I didn’t hesitate.’

She had been thirty-three at the time, and he had been forty-six; obviously they were old enough not to need a chaperone.

‘That evening, after dining at the Rôtisserie Périgourdine, he told me about his first wife and asked me if I would agree to marry him. I was alone, without a family, very poor. I said yes. It was only later on that I understood what kind of man he was, and how lucky I had been to meet him. Just think what would have happened if I had fallen ill before meeting him. I’d be in a hospital now, living on public charity.

‘It isn’t very cheerful for him, when he comes back, to find a woman in the state I’m in, and yet he has never said a word. On the contrary, he’s the one who comforts me; he presents as jolly a face as possible …’

Why did Maigret imagine that this man’s cheerfulness must be lugubrious? He felt sorry for both of them, of course. But for one reason or another, their misery didn’t quite touch him.

The words reached him as if through a veil. The scene he was witnessing in his room emanated the bleak tedium of a family photograph album that some strangers insist on showing you, not sparing you a single aunt or little cousin.

In fact he was falling asleep, he had to make an effort to keep his eyes open. He had already spent too much time hanging around in this stretch of street, which he suddenly disliked, and he felt a furious desire for the lights and hubbub of the Grand Boulevards.

'Five years ago I fell ill, and he hired the best specialists for me. At first he took six months' leave to look after me, even though it meant putting off his retirement. I don't know why I'm telling you all this.' (Neither did he!) 'Perhaps because I've seen you at your window several times, and you were looking over here with interest …? Apart from Madame Keller and the visits from my mother-in-law, I'm always alone … So I think …'

He had nearly dozed off. He must have closed his eyes, because she looked at him sadly.

'I'm boring you, aren't I?'

'Not at all, madame. I was just closing my eyes because I was thinking too.'

'What were you thinking about?'

'About you … About your life … Were you born in Paris?'

Perhaps, at last, he was going to be able to ask her a few questions.

'I was born in Le Havre.'

'Would it be indiscreet to ask you your maiden name?'

'Binet … Françoise Binet …'

And that was enough to set her off again.

'My father was a sailor. It's a strange coincidence, isn't it? He ended up as a quartermaster. There were nine children. Now there can't be more than three or four.'

'Don't you keep in touch with your family?'

'Not for a long time. As soon as the girls were old enough we were placed as domestic servants, and the boys made their own way. My mother and father are dead.'

'So you were a housemaid?'

'At first I was a nanny, at fourteen, in a family who spent their summers in Étretat. That family brought me to Paris, where they lived on Avenue Hoche. They were very rich people. I wanted to become a chambermaid. I went to a tailoring school on the Avenue de Wagram.'

'And what did you do then?'

He thought all of a sudden that he sensed a hesitation in her voice.

‘I had a suitor, and my employers threw me out.’

‘How old were you?’

‘Sixteen.’

‘Why did they throw you out?’

‘Because I didn’t come home.’

‘Did you stay out all night?’

‘Yes. I haven’t always been a good person. I was young. I wanted to enjoy myself.’

‘And did you enjoy yourself?’

‘At that age that’s what you think you’re doing.’

‘You stopped working?’

‘That’s what happened to me. Then I became a waitress in a local restaurant.’

‘Does your husband know all this?’

‘I told him I wasn’t worthy of him.’

‘Did you give him details?’

‘He refused to hear them.’

‘Did you fall a long way?’ he asked, looking at her carefully.

‘Not quite to the bottom, no.’

‘Did you have lovers?’

‘Yes.’

She added with a little laugh:

‘It’s hard to imagine, seeing me now, isn’t it?’

‘Did they give you money?’

‘Sometimes. But if that’s what you’re getting at, I didn’t make a profession of it.’

‘Were you still having these affairs when Boursicault met you?’

‘No, not for a long time.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. Because I didn’t feel like it any more. In short, it didn’t last for a long time. I don’t think it was in my temperament. It must be my nature to live in my household.’

‘When you were working at the gentlemen’s outfitters, where were you living?’

‘I had a room on Rue Monsieur-le-Prince, right nearby.’

‘Furnished?’

‘No. I had bought myself some furniture. I thought I would end my days as an old spinster. I was becoming quite frantic.’

Why had he suddenly got to his feet and was now pacing the room as he would have paced his office? He seemed to have

forgotten that there was a sick woman in her bed and frowned anxiously.

He looked mechanically around for an ashtray to empty his pipe, couldn't find one, and she guessed.

'There's one on the table in the dining room. You just have to open that door …'

He did so, turned the handle and, sure enough, on the sixteenth-century table, he found a brass ashtray with a big curved pipe resting on it. It was almost as if he had met Boursicault, whom he imagined in slippers and shirtsleeves, smoking that pipe in the flat.

The bleak voice said behind him, like someone reciting the rosary:

'On board ship, my husband smokes cigarettes, except in his cabin, but here he prefers his pipe and …'

He turned round abruptly and looked her in the eyes.

'Up until now you have seemed quite frank, Madame Boursicault.'

She seemed surprised by the attack, waited, and he noticed that one of her hands was clenching the sheet.

'I'm sure that you've been telling me the truth.'

She murmured:

'I have been telling you the truth.'

'I'd like you to go on doing so.'

He was slightly hesitant about going on the attack, because he wasn't sure that he wasn't mistaken, and in that case he would look like an executioner.

'*How did he get into the house?*'

He was standing a metre from the bed, and he must have looked enormous to the sick woman, whom he was looking up and down with his empty pipe in his mouth. Suddenly they were enveloped in another kind of silence, as if they had both been holding their breath.

He was sure that she had turned pale, in so far as she could get any paler than usual. Her nostrils were as pinched as the nostrils of a corpse. She was very thin under the sheet. He wanted to look away, perhaps take his hat and go.

'Who are you talking about?'

'I don't know who he is. I'm talking about the one who comes to see you when your husband is at sea, whom the concierge seems never to have met.'

'I don't understand.'

‘Listen to me, Madame Boursicault. I wish you no harm. I’m a policeman, and I’m doing my duty. One of my inspectors was shot down outside your window.’

‘Do you think I fired the shot?’

‘I’ve never claimed that, and I’m sure that you didn’t. But you see, I’m also sure that you’ve talked to me so much about your husband and one part of your life the better to hide other episodes. Shortly I’m going to give my men the task of going back through the years from the moment when you got married. The police in Le Havre will take up the trail from there. It will probably take a lot of time. There will probably be gaps. But with a bit of patience we’ll reconstruct more or less the whole of your life and find everyone who has been in contact with you.’

This time he turned his face away completely, because she had closed her eyes, and he saw a tear spill from her eyelids. She wasn’t moving. He said nothing for almost a minute.

He continued, stuffing his pipe to regain his composure:

‘Excuse me if I don’t believe in your migraines. Shortly I will also call the doctor who treats you, and I know in advance what he’s going to tell me.’

She sighed faintly and still didn’t open her eyes.

‘At this stage, one of my English colleagues would be duty-bound to put you on your guard and remind you that anything you say could be used against you. French law doesn’t oblige me to do that, but I don’t want to catch you out. It’s up to you to judge whether or not you have something you want to tell me.’

Slowly she shook her head. He had expected worse, he had expected her to faint, whether genuinely or not, or to have a fit of nerves or indignation. But it was almost more embarrassing to see her so motionless and prostrate.

‘I am convinced, and I won’t hide it from you, that you are receiving visits without anyone’s knowledge and, when your blinds are lowered, sometimes for three days, it’s because there’s someone in your flat. That someone probably knows the habits of the house. Every morning the concierge goes out for more than half an hour to do her shopping. At that moment it’s easy to get into your flat. You aren’t saying anything?’

‘I have nothing to say.’

‘Are you claiming it isn’t true?’

Her eyelids parted at last, and a cold gaze settled on the

inspector.

'I suppose you have the right to imagine whatever you like.'

Her voice suddenly had an energy that it had been impossible to suspect a few minutes earlier.

'Was there a man in your room when the shot was fired?'

She stared at him without answering.

'A woman?' he pressed.

Her lips didn't move.

'You really are ill, and I don't want to tire you. You know that I'm in the house opposite, at Mademoiselle Clément's. The telephone is at the head of your bed. If at any time you feel a need to communicate with me, call me.'

He hesitated, embarrassed.

'I must stress, Madame Boursicault, that in spite of appearances I am not your enemy. It is my duty to seek the truth, and I will discover it. My wish, I want you to understand, is that it should be done with as little trouble as possible.'

She still didn't say anything. She was looking at him carefully, as if thinking to herself. He waited for a moment, still hoping that she would speak.

He had picked up his hat. He still wasn't heading for the door. One last time he opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again without saying anything.

He was sure he wouldn't get anything out of her. Perhaps she would call him a bit later?

He didn't count on it. He said goodbye to her unsmilingly.

'Please excuse me. I will send up Madame Keller.'

Her lips still tightly pressed together, she watched him leave, and he closed the door behind him and sighed deeply once he was on the landing.

The concierge was waiting for him in the corridor, and seemed surprised to see him looking so serious. He himself wasn't aware of his expression.

'Is she not well?'

'It would be better for you to go up. If anything happens, please call me at Mademoiselle Clément's.'

He hadn't had dinner. He went to the Auvergnat's bistro with the intention of doing so, but stopped at the bar and downed two glasses of wine one after the other. There was a mirror behind the bottles and he was surprised to see such a furrowed face.

A few minutes later, without taking the time to eat, he was in communication with Torrence.

'Is Lucas not there?'

'He's just left for Place d'Italie, where some Arabs have been knifing each other.'

'Would you urgently ask the wire-tappers to listen in on the number of Madame Boursicault, Rue Lhomond? Send an inspector too.'

'Vacher is here.'

'Fine. He knows the house already. I'll probably be at the little restaurant opposite.'

As he hung up he noticed Mademoiselle Clément's face behind the spyhole, wearing an unfamiliar expression. He didn't understand immediately. She didn't look as if she was playing. She was looking at him if not with fear, then at least with a certain anxiety.

It was because he himself had suddenly changed. Things had fallen into place, and he had stopped floundering and sniffing around.

He found her at the door to the sitting room.

'Are you going out?'

'I'm going to eat.'

'What should I do if someone calls you?'

'Come to the bistro and tell me.'

She didn't dare ask if there was any news. Perhaps she had heard what he was saying to Torrence? At any rate she knew that it was no longer the time to act the crazy woman.

'Is that you, Torrence?'

This time he was phoning from the bistro.

'She still hasn't asked for a line, chief.'

'In that case it's likely that she won't. Keep listening in on her anyway. Do you have lots of men available?'

'There are four or five that we can use tonight.'

Maigret spelled out the name Boursicault, then Binet.

'Take a note. She's forty-eight, and she was born in Le Havre. Her father was in the navy. She has brothers and sisters. That's for the flying squad in Le Havre. Tell them to look in the town hall registers and anywhere else they can. They probably won't find much.'

‘And in Paris?’

‘Tell them to visit the town halls as well. She lived in the Faubourg-du-Roule. You would do well to cast an eye at the old Vice Squad files from twenty years and even twenty-five years ago.’

Fat Torrence, on the other end of the line, was writing frantically.

‘Is that all?’

‘No. Go up to Records and check that there’s nothing in the name of Binet. Tomorrow morning, I’d like someone to go to the gentleman’s outfitter on Boulevard Saint-Michel, not far from Rue Monsieur-le-Prince. The owners may have changed fifteen years ago, but it’s possible that we’ll find them again.’

All of that could just as easily take weeks or a few hours. It was entirely up to chance.

‘Last of all, find out about someone called Françoise Binet, at 48, Rue Monsieur-le-Prince. She lived in that house fifteen years ago.’

‘Are you staying down there?’

‘Yes. I’ll keep Vacher with me. Is he on nights?’

‘He went on duty an hour ago.’

‘How’s Janvier getting on?’

‘They might be sending him home in two or three days. He’s impatient. His wife too. The doctor would rather keep him a bit longer.’

By the time he came back to the bistro, Inspector Vacher was already there waiting for him, drinking a coffee with a shot of spirits.

‘Have you eaten?’

‘Yes. Do you have any news?’

‘Is it still raining?’

Vacher pointed to his drenched raincoat, which he had hung on the hook.

‘Too bad, you poor thing. I think I’m going to ask you to spend the night outside …’

He changed his mind.

‘Then again, if you stand at the sitting-room window, it’ll come to the same thing. There’s only one house you need to keep under surveillance.’

He ate unenthusiastically. He forgot to phone the doctor as he had threatened Madame Boursicault he would. In any case he hadn’t asked her for the name of her doctor. He could have found it out from the concierge.

That wasn't why he went to see Madame Keller in her lodge when he had finished his meal. Immediately, as he expected, she looked at him reproachfully.

'How is she?'

'What did you say to her? I found her on her bed like a corpse, and she paid me no attention. Her eyes were closed. She was crying. Fat tears rolling down her poor cheeks.'

'Didn't she speak to you?'

'She just shook her head when I asked her if she needed anything. She didn't care whether the light was on or not. I closed the window and turned it out.'

Maigret nearly went upstairs. But to say what?

He was aware of the responsibility he had assumed.

'Is there any medicine in her room?'

'There are all sorts: bottles, pills, powders. The doctors have tried everything. Do you think she might …?'

The concierge was getting worried. He kept his cool.

'I don't think that's her style,' he said, 'but you might be better off staying near her until I send you a nurse.'

'She won't want that.'

'Tell her it's on my orders.'

'She'll be angry with me …'

He shrugged his shoulders, crossed the street, found Vacher on Mademoiselle Clément's doorstep and sent him to find a nurse whose services the Police Judiciaire used frequently.

At ten o'clock in the evening, Rue Lhomond was calm, with only the gentle sound of the rain. There was a light on opposite. The blind wasn't lowered. From his window, Maigret could see the nurse reading a novel, sitting in the armchair that he had occupied previously. Madame Boursicault seemed to be sleeping.

Mademoiselle Clément had withdrawn to her room a moment before. Mademoiselle Isabelle hadn't gone out. The Lotards' baby wasn't crying. Fachin was working, and the Safts, in their room, were talking in an undertone.

On the ground floor, Vacher had opened the sitting-room curtains to see what was happening outside and he had taken up his position in the darkness, a pot of coffee within reach, smoking cigarette after cigarette.

Maigret waited for his wife's phone call before going to bed; he came downstairs in his slippers.

‘… No really. I’m very well,’ he said.

‘I hope you’re not going to move into that house permanently. Hortense is much better, and I could be back in two days, if not tomorrow evening … You don’t sound pleased about it …’

He repeated absently:

‘No, really! No, really!’

Then, before going upstairs, he went and exchanged a few words with Vacher, in the darkness of the sitting room. He could hear Mademoiselle Clément coming and going in her room; then the mattress creaked under her weight.

It took him a long time to go to sleep. He was still aware of that illuminated window on the other side of the street. He also thought about that idiot Paulus and started to be angry with him, as if holding him responsible for all that had happened and was still to happen.

7.

In which Maigret remembers the only chicken whose throat he slit, and Mademoiselle Clément is very unsettled to meet a murderer

The first time he woke up, a little before one o'clock, there were still two lights on in the block, and he had managed to put a name to each window and say almost with certainty what the people were doing.

Following his instructions, the nurse hadn't lowered the blind, and the lace curtains were open, so that he could see the white patch of the bed and the motionless face of Françoise Boursicault.

She was lying on her back, her eyes closed. Seen from above, her nose looked thinner and longer.

The nurse was still reading her book, with a cup of coffee within reach on the table, which she had pulled close to her armchair.

That night Maigret felt something almost like a guilty conscience. He had just had some confused dreams that he could barely remember but that had left an unpleasant impression.

He went downstairs without turning the light on and stepped into the sitting room, where nothing could be seen but the reddish tip of Vacher's cigarette.

'Is that you, chief?'

'How are you?'

'I'm fine. The fat lady has left me everything I need. She got up just now to make me some coffee. She was in her nightdress. If I hadn't been on duty I'd happily have said a word.'

'Didn't you notice anything outside?'

'Apart from a drunk zigzagging down the street half an hour ago. Following your instructions I went outside and, a bit further off, I asked to see his papers. He's a tramp I know by sight, who was on his way to sleep in Place Maubert.'

The phone-tap hadn't produced a thing. It was true that Madame Boursicault could only have made a phone call before the nurse arrived, during a period of no more than an hour.

'Keep listening in!' Maigret sighed.

He hesitated. He knew where Mademoiselle Clément put the beer, behind the cellar door. He went to get a bottle without making a sound and brought it to his room, leaving Vacher at the window.

In the Ternes district, lots of the bistros were still open, and the men from the Police Judiciaire were asking questions about a certain Françoise Binet.

Could they hope, after such a long time, that it would produce a result? Luckily there are more Parisians than you would think for whom most of the city is foreign territory and who confine themselves to their own district as if it were a village. There are some whose universe consists only of a few streets and who, for twenty years and more, have frequented the same brasseries or the same little bar.

Maigret was sure that Françoise Boursicault wasn't sleeping, that she wouldn't sleep that night, and that her brain was whirring.

Had she suspected that they would tap her phone? It was likely. She must have been thinking of everything, with the patience, the minute precision of someone who has for years known only the solitude of her bed.

And yet he would have bet on her doing something: *she was obliged to do something*.

He went heavily back to sleep, dreamed again, woke up for a second time before sunrise and saw the nurse leaning on the window, smoking a cigarette. He didn't go downstairs, he went back to bed and, when he opened his eyes, the sky was dreary, the rooftops were dripping, but it had stopped raining.

Nothing had happened during the night. Vacher had kept watch for nothing, and Maigret went to relieve him.

'You can go back to bed. You may have to resume your stakeout tonight. Drop by at headquarters and tell Torrence to send me someone. If there's any news get him to keep me up to date.'

Once in his life, when he was about twelve, he had tried to cut the neck of a chicken, because his father was away, and his mother had asked him to. He still remembered. He was pale, with his nostrils pinched. The feathers palpitated in his hand. The creature flapped madly. He couldn't hold its head down on the block used

for chopping wood, and he flailed about clumsily with the axe in his other hand.

His first blow had been so clumsy that he had only managed to wound the bird and, to deliver the next few blows, he had closed his eyes.

He hadn't eaten it. He had never killed any more chickens in his life.

Madame Boursicault had a long, thin neck as well. And while she might have remained motionless in her bed, he thought he could sense her fighting against her constraints.

But he had been wrong to think that she might try to end it all. If she had had to, she would probably have done it immediately after he left, before the nurse arrived.

He phoned the nurse.

'She had a peaceful night,' she told him. 'She didn't sleep much, perhaps two or three hours, in several stretches, but she didn't get agitated.'

'She didn't say anything?'

'She doesn't say a word to me, not even to ask for a glass of water.'

'I think you can leave her.'

He saw her leaving a little later, with a raincoat over her white uniform and an umbrella in her hand. Then Madame Keller dragged the bins to the side of the pavement, looked up towards Maigret's windows, noticed him and gave him only a dark look of reproach.

He had told himself that once the nurse was gone Madame Boursicault would get up to close the curtains and maybe lower the blind.

He had underestimated her. She left the window as it was, and he thought he understood that it was a kind of bravado or contempt. This way he could go on keeping her under surveillance, she wasn't trying to hide. The concierge brought her up her breakfast. He saw the women's lips moving, but it was only the concierge who sometimes turned towards him. Would Madame Boursicault dare to give her an errand?

Lucas arrived a little later in a taxi and came up to Maigret's room while he was shaving.

'Torrence has gone to bed. He caught the flu and has a bad headache. He's given me some information to pass on to you.'

'Have they found someone who knew her?'

‘At the Diabolo, a moth-eaten nightclub on Rue de l’Étoile. An old drunk woman hangs out there almost every night. You must have met her in Ternes. She dresses as they used to twenty-five years ago: short, skin-tight dresses that make her look like a little girl. She often ends up spending the night at the station. They call her Thérèse.’

‘What does she say?’

‘She had drunk a lot when little Lapointe unearthed her, and he didn’t get much out of her. I’ve asked the local police to bring her to the Quai as soon as she’s slept it off.’

‘Did she know Françoise Binet?’

‘That’s what she says.’

‘“A pretty little thing,” she said, “plump as a quail, who laughed all the time, showing the loveliest teeth in the world. She was with Dédé. It didn’t last, because Dédé wanted to put her on the game.”’

‘Who’s Dédé?’

‘They think he’s a guy who runs a bar in Nantes now.’

‘She didn’t mention any others?’

‘Only first names and nicknames. She said it again: “A pretty little thing … I’d be curious to know what became of her …”’

‘Listen, Lucas. In a little while the concierge is probably going to go out to do her shopping. Stay alert. Keep a close eye on her. It may be that she’s going to post a letter, or send a telegram, or even meet someone. I’m not banking on it, but if it does happen it’s important that we get the message.’

‘Loud and clear, chief.’

He went downstairs and called the Nantes Flying Squad just in case. Mademoiselle Clément, who was getting dressed, drew aside the curtain of the spyhole to see who was using the phone.

‘Maigret here, from the Police Judiciaire. Who am I speaking to?’

‘Grollin. It’s a pleasure to hear your voice, chief.’

‘Would you like to take a trip down to a bar kept by someone called Dédé? Do you know it?’

‘It’s by the harbour, yes.’

‘You’ll be questioning him about one Françoise Binet, whom he knew twenty years ago or more.’

‘Do you think he’ll remember? He looks to me like he’s known a few in his life.’

‘Go anyway. Try and find out who his successor was with the girl. Get everything out of him that you can. Call me here, not at the

Quai.'

He gave him Mademoiselle Clément's number.

'It's bucketing down out there!' Grollin sighed. 'It doesn't matter. I've got an umbrella. Dédé will be in bed. It'll put the wind up him to be woken by the police.'

Mademoiselle Clément came out of the sitting room, her face freshly powdered, and the little hairs around her ears and on the nape of her neck still damp.

'Would you like some coffee?'

'For me and Lucas, if you don't mind.'

The tenants now greeted him as if he lived in the house, always with a questioning look in their eyes.

'Take a close look at her window, Lucas. Note the position of the curtains. If, at any time during the day, you notice a change, be sure to tell me.'

'Are you expecting her to give a signal?'

'I would swear that there's a signal.'

'But the telephone? Doesn't she have a phone within reach?'

'It's not enough.'

'Are you sure someone came to see her while her husband was away?'

'I'm convinced of it. It's the only possible explanation. It's likely, in fact, that he called her before he came into the street.'

'So there was no need for a signal.'

'Suppose that at the last moment the concierge came home, or the doctor arrived. He didn't come on regular days. He called in to see her from time to time when he was on his rounds.'

'I understand.'

'They needed to agree a way of warning of a danger. It might be the position of the curtains, or the blind, or anything. I've looked through that window so much over the last few days that I wonder if I would see the difference. When was the last time you came?'

'The day before yesterday.'

Lucas, his face raised towards the window opposite, frowned.

'Have you noticed something?'

'I'm not sure. I'd like to take a look from up there.'

They went up to Maigret's room, which had been Émile Paulus' room. Lucas went straight to the window.

'When I came last time, three days ago, I remember that the window opposite was open.'

‘That’s right. It wasn’t raining yet. It was a lot warmer than today. Go on.’

‘I may be mistaken, but I don’t think the copper pot was there.’

In the middle of the window-sill a copper pot could now indeed be seen, containing a green plant.

Maigret was sure that the pot hadn’t been in the same place the evening before. He had seen it in a corner of the bedroom, on a narrow table, and had even stared at it for a long time when he was talking to Madame Boursicault.

‘Stay here. Keep an eye on the street.’

He crossed the road and went into Madame Keller’s lodge; she received him with marked coldness. She was getting ready to go and do her shopping. The postman had been, and there were letters in the pigeon-holes, but none in the name of Madame Boursicault.

‘Can you tell me, Madame Keller, if, when you went up this morning, your tenant asked you to change the position of that house plant?’

She muttered a crisp ‘no’.

‘Do you sometimes put it by the window?’

‘No.’

‘Forgive me for pressing. The question is much more important than you can imagine. You’re the one who does the housework. If I’m not mistaken, that plant is usually in the left-hand corner, near the dining-room door.’

‘That’s its place.’

‘You’ve *never* been asked to put it by the window?’

She suddenly stared at him, and he understood that he had stirred a memory. But she didn’t want to speak, because she now saw him as a cruel man who was making her tenant suffer.

‘She asked you to, didn’t she? When?’

‘A long time ago.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. It’s none of my business.’

Without seeming to notice her obvious ill will, he insisted:

‘How many months ago?’

‘At least six.’

He held his ground and felt a little quiver in his chest. His only fear was to see the woman in front of him retreating into silence. He smiled at her cravenly.

‘Six months ago it was autumn. The window was probably open?’

‘I don’t remember.’

‘I’m sure you’d already gone up to do the housekeeping, that you’d come back down again, that you were getting ready, as you are today, to go and do your shopping …’

She followed him attentively, and it was clear that her memories were falling into place. She was surprised that he was guessing so precisely. She said:

‘I went back up, yes …’

‘You went back up, when you weren’t supposed to go back up …’

‘I’d forgotten to ask her what she wanted to eat. I also wanted to know if I was supposed to renew a prescription. She asked me to put the copper pot in the window.’

‘Without telling you why?’

‘Because it would do the plant good. The sun was shining.’

‘What happened over the next few days?’

Defeated, she glanced in amazement at the inspector.

‘I wonder how you could have guessed. The next day the sun was shining again, and I wanted to put the plant back on the window-sill.’

‘She told you not to?’

‘Yes.’

‘Thank you, Madame Keller.’

He nearly asked her if her tenant had given her an errand but preferred to leave that one up to Lucas.

‘Are you going to upset her again?’

It was better not to answer, and, a few minutes later, he knocked at the door. No one told him to come in. He turned the handle, pushed the door open and found Françoise Boursicault’s gaze fixed upon him. With a sigh of resignation she fell back on her pillow.

‘I do apologize for disturbing you again.’

She didn’t say a word, kept her lips pinched; her whole life was concentrated in her pupils.

‘I wanted to check that the nurse being here hadn’t kept you from sleeping …’

More silence.

‘And I thought that perhaps you might have something to say to me this morning?’

She still didn’t respond. He walked back and forth in the room and stopped as if by chance by the house plant, whose leaves he began to stroke.

Then, just as some people have an obsession with straightening paintings when they visit other people's houses, he picked up the copper pot and put it back on the table.

'That's where it lives, isn't it? The concierge must have made a mistake.'

He deliberately avoided looking at her. He stood there for a moment, turned around and, as he expected, found her looking much paler, with panic in her eyes.

'Does it bother you if I move this pot away from the window?'

He was worried that she would start crying again and thought about that chicken from his childhood. He hesitated for a few seconds, grabbed the back of a chair with a crimson velvet seat, straddled it, facing the bed, and began to light his pipe.

Never mind that she wasn't quite ready. He had just decided to try out the operation.

'Did you expect *him* to come and see you this morning?'

Never, perhaps, had he ever felt such a hateful gaze resting on him, a mute hatred, without violence, mixed with contempt and perhaps with a kind of bitter resignation.

They were suddenly on strange terrain, where they moved as if in a state of unreality, and they understood one another almost wordlessly; each glance, each shiver became heavy with meaning.

'He's still in Paris, isn't he?'

After each phrase, he gave her time to think, while listening out for sounds on the staircase.

'If he wasn't in Paris any more you wouldn't be worried and you wouldn't have put that vase in the window. Because you got up to move it. It wasn't the concierge who did that. And it wasn't the nurse either.'

She reached her bony hand towards the glass of water on the bedside table and took a gulp from it, with an effort that stiffened her neck.

'Right now the Nantes police are questioning a man you used to know, one Dédé; Dédé will give us other names. And those people in turn will give us still others.'

It was almost driving him to distraction.

'It's possible that he won't come, that he's suspicious. He must have been waiting for your phone call, yesterday or last night, and you weren't able to call him.'

A pause.

‘He knows, thanks to you, that a trap has been set up in the street. Perhaps over the last few days he’s been roaming about the area without coming too close. What I wonder is why he hasn’t rented a room or a flat in the house. It would have been so much easier!’

Was he mistaken? Wasn’t there the vague appearance of a smile on those tense lips?

He remembered the words of the old drunk woman:

‘A pretty little thing, plump as a quail …’

‘Do you know, Françoise, what’s going to happen?’

She had frowned at the sound of her first name.

‘He’s going to come to the street. Perhaps he’s already come and seen the copper vase warning him of danger.

‘He thinks that we’re going to arrest you.

‘Whatever happens, he wants to keep that from happening.’

At last he had a reaction. The sick woman sat up and spat at him fiercely:

‘I don’t want to!’

‘So he exists, and I wasn’t mistaken.’

‘Do you have no pity?’

‘Did he have any pity for my inspector, who hadn’t done anything to him? He thought only of his own personal safety.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘Let’s say that he thought only of you …’

What she didn’t yet suspect was that in a few scraps of phrases she had told him more than he had expected to get out of her.

‘Yes! Let’s say that he fired the gun for you, to prevent your husband, when he came back from Bordeaux …’

‘Shut up, for the love of God! Don’t you understand how hateful this all is?’

She had lost her self-control. Unable to contain herself any longer, incapable of staying motionless in her bed, she got up, in her nightdress, revealing her bare feet and thin legs. She stood on the rug with fury in her eyes.

‘Arrest me, since you’ve found out so much. I was the one who fired the gun. I was the one who injured your inspector. Put me in jail and let’s get it all over with …’

She was about to walk towards a wardrobe, probably to take out some clothes and get dressed, but she had forgotten how ill she was. She fell absurdly at Maigret’s feet and found herself on all fours on

the floor, vainly trying to stand up.

He thought more than ever about the story with the chicken.

He had to grab her around the waist, while she fought and, whether deliberately or not, struck out at him and clutched his tie.

'Calm down, Françoise. You're going to hurt yourself, you know very well that I'm not going to arrest you, that you didn't fire the gun, that you'd have found it very difficult to do so.'

'I tell you, it was me …'

It took a good minute, and Maigret wondered whether Mademoiselle Isabelle or Monsieur Kridelka could see them from their windows. At last he managed to lift her up, and she wasn't heavy. He set her down on the bed and held her by her wrists until at last he felt her muscles relaxing.

'Are you going to be reasonable?'

She shook her head but, when he let go, she didn't move, and he wrapped the sheet around her body, which had been half-exposed during their struggle.

He stood back up and was straightening his hair when he heard her yelling at him like a furious child:

'I'm not going to tell you anything.'

With her face in the pillow, she was speaking between her teeth, to herself, and he had a certain amount of trouble hearing her.

'I won't tell you anything, and you will never find him. You are a brute. I hate you. If anything else unpleasant happens, it will be your fault. Oh, how I hate you …'

He couldn't help smiling, standing there watching her, without rancour, with pity in his eyes.

As he didn't move, it was she who half-turned her head to look at him with one eye.

'What are you waiting for? For me to talk? I won't tell you anything. You can do what you like, I won't say anything. And first of all, what gives you the right to be in my bedroom?'

She changed her attitude once more. She was no longer a woman approaching her fifties. She was a kid who knew she was wrong, refused to admit it and was fiercely fighting back.

'You might be a policeman but you can't come inside people's homes without a warrant. Have you got one? Show me! If you haven't, then leave now. Do you hear me? I order you to leave …'

He nearly burst out laughing, releasing tension himself. He was getting a reaction.

‘You’re talking nonsense, Françoise …’

‘I forbid you to call me that … If you don’t leave right now I’m going to scream, I’ll call the neighbours, I’ll tell them that you’re taking pleasure in torturing a sick woman …’

‘I’ll come back,’ he said compliantly, making for the door.

‘It’s not worth it. You won’t get anything out of me. Go! I hate … I …’

He realized that she was going to get up again and preferred to go out on to the landing and close the door. He was smiling in spite of himself. He heard her through the wall, still talking to herself.

When he reached the street, he looked up and observed that she had put the copper pot in the window, perhaps just to annoy him.

He was drinking a glass of white wine, the first of the day, at the Auvergnat’s bistro, when the concierge came back from the market. He saw Lucas following her and called out to him:

‘Well?’

Lucas noticed that the chief was in a different mood and was surprised at his cheerfulness.

‘Did she talk?’

‘No. What about you?’

‘I followed the concierge as you told me to. She went to Rue Mouffetard, and I didn’t take my eyes off her. She stopped at several little stalls. I got close enough to hear what she was saying. She just bought some vegetables and some fruit. Then she went into a butcher’s shop.’

‘No one approached her?’

‘I didn’t notice anything suspicious. She didn’t post a letter. Admittedly she knew I was on her heels.’

‘She didn’t make a phone call either?’

‘No. Several times she looked at me angrily, and her lips moved as if she was saying some unpleasant things to me under her breath.’

‘She’s not the only one!’ Maigret sighed.

He went on studying the street.

‘Do you think the man is in the area?’

‘It’s very likely. He didn’t get his usual phone call last night. He’s worried. But I couldn’t stop Françoise putting her copper pot back in the window.’

Luckily there were few passers-by. If one of them looked up

towards Madame Boursicault's window, the two men couldn't fail to notice.

When they went back to Mademoiselle Clément's, she in turn had gone out shopping. They had seen her passing by, with a shopping bag in her hand. Lucas sat down by the sitting-room window. Maigret called Quai des Orfèvres.

Vauquelin picked up the phone.

'I questioned the old woman a good half-hour ago. I had to promise her money to go for a drink. She's telling me lots of names, people who frequented the Ternes district twenty-five years ago, most of whom have disappeared from circulation. It's confused. I'm taking notes. I'll check.'

'Did anyone go to Rue Monsieur-le Prince?'

'Colin has just got back. The concierge is still the same. She remembers the girl. She was a quiet person who didn't receive anyone and never went out in the evening. Then she met someone respectable, an older widower, and it was only when she got married that she left the house.'

'She didn't receive letters from abroad?'

'She didn't receive any mail at all.'

Maigret put some money in the money-box and went to chat to Lucas; a few moments later the telephone rang. It was Nantes.

'Is that you, chief? I'm just back from Dédé's bar. He was in bed, as I expected, and at first he was on his guard. When I talked to him about Françoise Binet, it took him a moment to remember. He called her Lulu.'

'Does he know what's become of her?'

'He lost sight of her. Then, two or three years later, he met her with a very dark-complexioned young man.'

'Another guy from the underworld?'

'No. That's just it. He had never seen him before. According to Dédé he looked like a clerk or a salesman for one of the big stores.'

'In what part of town did this all happen?'

'Near Place Clichy. He didn't talk to them. Lulu pretended not to recognize him.'

'What does he say about her?'

'That she was a silly little goose who didn't know what she wanted, and that she must have ended up getting married and having lots of children.'

'Is that all?'

‘That’s all. He gave the impression he’d told me the lot. He didn’t hide the fact that he’d tried to make her work, and you know what that means. She tried: it didn’t work. According to him, she’d happened on one customer who put her off the job for good.’

‘Thank you.’

The copper vase was still by the window. Maigret went up to his room and saw Françoise Boursicault, who was making a phone call from her bed. She didn’t look as if she was about to hang up.

She was speaking calmly, she looked serious and thoughtful. Every now and again she nodded her head.

When she set the receiver back down, it was to go to bed and close her eyes.

Maigret knew that they were going to call him and he went downstairs and paced up and down the corridor as he waited for the call.

‘Hello! Is that you, inspector?’

‘Yes. Who was she speaking to?’

‘A lawyer. Maître Lechat, who lives on Boulevard des Batignolles.’

‘Did it sound as if she knew him?’

‘No. She told him she needed to consult him on a very important matter, but that she was in bed and couldn’t leave. She asked him to come to Rue Lhomond urgently. He made her repeat her name three or four times. The idea of crossing Paris without knowing why didn’t seem to delight him. He tried to draw it out of her, but she told him nothing more.’

‘Did they arrange to meet?’

‘In the end he promised to come and see her late this morning.’

Mademoiselle Clément came back, clutching her shopping bag. As he was hanging up, Maigret heard her panting slightly, even before he saw her. It seemed to him that she was trying to avoid him; she was hurrying towards the kitchen with unfamiliar haste.

‘What’s up with her?’ he asked Lucas.

‘I don’t know. She seems to be in a complete state …’

Maigret went into the kitchen, where she was arranging the vegetables in the larder.

She turned her back on him, deliberately avoiding having to face him. Her ears were red, her breathing, harder than usual, lifted her large bosom.

‘So tell me, Mademoiselle Clément!’

‘What?’

‘Don’t you want to see me any more?’

She turned around all at once, cheeks crimson, eyes burning.

‘What are you trying to hide from me?’

‘Me?’

Maigret’s eyes laughed.

‘*What did he ask you?*’

‘Have you been following me?’

‘Tell me how he accosted you and repeat exactly what he told you.’

‘That he was a journalist …’

‘Did he look like a journalist?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t think so. I don’t know many journalists, but …’

‘But?’

‘His hair was nearly white.’

‘Tall, short?’

‘Short. Much shorter than me.’

‘Well dressed?’

‘Correctly dressed, yes. I stopped by a market stall and I was buying some radishes. He took off his hat to greet me.’

‘What kind of hat?’

‘A grey felt hat. He was dressed all in grey.’

‘Did he ask you what I was doing?’

‘Not like that. He explained that he represented a newspaper, and that he wanted to know how the inquiry was going.’

‘What did you tell him?’

‘I looked around for you, you or your inspector.’

‘Were you frightened?’

‘I don’t know. He looked at me insistently. He’s very thin, with circles under his eyes, a yellowish complexion.

‘I said, “Why don’t you ask Inspector Maigret?”

‘“Because he wouldn’t answer me. Is he still at your place?”

‘“Yes.”

‘“Has he gone to the house opposite?”

‘Then I stammered that I didn’t know. I was starting to get frightened. I thought he wouldn’t dare do anything in the crowd, but I still hurried to a butcher’s shop. It seemed like he was going to follow me in. Then I realized that he was hesitating. He looked anxiously at both sides of the street, then disappeared towards Boulevard Saint-Germain.’

‘Are you sure you didn’t tell him I went to see Madame Boursicault twice?’

‘Certain.’

‘And that you didn’t talk to him about her?’

‘I didn’t even know her name until you told me.’

‘Whose name?’

‘The sick woman on the first floor. She’s the one you’re talking about, isn’t she? And him, was he the murderer?’

‘It’s possible.’

The fat woman looked at him for a moment, her eyes wide, and then, out of sheer tension, exploded into an endless peal of laughter.

8.

In which Inspector Lucas takes notes for a fine story

Later on, it would become one of the inquiries that Lucas would most happily relate, so much so that the Police Judiciaire ended up knowing some of his phrases by heart.

'I was still at the window of the little sitting room. Suddenly the sky turned as black as Good Friday, and hailstones like walnuts started falling and bouncing off the cobbles. I remember I had left my window open back at headquarters. I wanted to call Joseph, the office clerk, to ask him to close it.

'Maigret was pacing back and forth in the corridor, with his pipe between his teeth and his hands behind his back, when I passed close by him, and I don't think he saw me.

'But when I answered the phone, under the stairs, he took the receiver from my hands, put it back in place, still absent-mindedly, and said:

'"Not now, son."'

In Lucas' stories, Maigret often called him 'son', even though there was only about ten years' difference between them.

'The hail fell for almost an hour. The papers said it was one of the most violent storms ever recorded; there was millions of francs' worth of damage around Argenteuil. Maigret had left the door open. During all this time he walked between the front door to the end of the corridor.

'Mademoiselle Clément, from the kitchen, watched him through the spyhole. She came to speak to me in a low voice and she was concerned.

'"I don't know what's wrong with him. He's scaring me!"

'And at last the phone rang.'

At this point in his story, Lucas always left a silence, and then

said in a neutral voice:

'He looked up and took the receiver with a sigh of relief.'

It is true that the hail fell that morning, that Maigret paced the corridor for a long time and that he hurried to the phone as soon as it rang. He said:

'Hello! Maigret here.'

And a voice at the other end, a voice that seemed far away, seemed to echo:

'Hello!'

After which there was a silence. Hailstones bounced off the doorway into the corridor. Mademoiselle Clément, in her kitchen, holding a saucepan, didn't move, frozen mid-gesture as if in a photograph.

'Do you know who's calling you?' a voice said at last.

'Yes.'

'Who?'

'The one who shot Inspector Janvier.'

'But you don't know my name?'

'I'll find out shortly.'

'How?'

'We're already at Place Clichy.'

There was another silence.

'What has she said?'

'Nothing. She put the green plant in the window.'

Another silence. The man must have been calling from a bar with an open door, because the sound of the hail could be heard at the other end of the line.

'I can get to the border before I'm identified.'

'That's possible. I don't think you will.'

'Why?'

'You know very well.'

Maigret put down his now unlit pipe on the phone, and his eye rested on the coin box and the little note.

'Are you going to arrest her?'

'I may have to.'

'Do the journalists know that you've been to see her?'

'Not yet.'

'No one?'

'Just the concierge.'

Maigret heard a sigh. He did nothing to encourage the man to

speak. Each of them took his time.

'What do you know about me?'

'That you're short, middle-aged, grey-haired, and that you wear a suit, a raincoat and a grey hat.'

'Did Mademoiselle Clément tell you that?'

'Yes.'

'I have time to change my clothes and go to the airport to take a plane abroad.'

'I'm not contradicting you.'

'You admit that I can escape?'

'Yes.'

'If I gave myself up, would you agree to leave the person you know about out of the case?'

'It's an eventuality that I've already considered.'

'But you aren't promising anything?'

'Not before I know the details.'

'The details of what?'

'What happened twenty years ago.'

'Just those?'

'Yes.'

'You won't get involved in the inspector's case?'

Maigret fell silent in turn, and an eternity seemed to pass.

'No,' he said at last.

'Would you let me go and see her before handing myself in?'

Mademoiselle Clément was still motionless in her kitchen, saucepan in hand, and Lucas, in his armchair, seemed to be holding his breath.

'On one condition.'

'What is it?'

'That you won't make an attempt on her life, or on yours. Even if she asks you to.'

The silence switched sides. This one was the longest.

'That's your demand?'

'Yes.'

'OK.'

'In that case you can come. You probably aren't far from Rue Lhomond.'

'No distance at all.'

'I'll stay at my window during your visit. You mustn't close the curtains, or lower the blind.'

‘I promise.’

‘When you leave the house, a small car will be waiting a little way along the street. You just have to meet me there.’

A silence. Finally the sound of the receiver being replaced.

Maigret took the time to light his pipe, reached the sitting-room door and looked vaguely at Lucas.

‘Call headquarters and ask for a car. Make it stop a little way down the street.’

‘Shall I wait for you there?’

‘It’s not worth it.’

‘You don’t need me any more?’

‘No.’

‘Can I stay anyway?’

‘If you like.’

Had Maigret really said, ‘If you like’?

It was never certain, but Lucas took it for granted, and that was how he was able to go on telling his story more or less to the end.

While Lucas made for the telephone, Maigret was taking a bottle of beer from behind the cellar door, without glancing at Mademoiselle Clément, whom he seemed not to see. Then he went to the stairs and climbed them slowly, glan-cing into the bedroom of Mademoiselle Blanche, who was lying on her bed, in her dressing gown, reading the paper.

A few moments later he was leaning against the window, which he had opened, and the hail had stopped as if by magic. Madame Boursicault was in her bed, hands crossed under her head, staring at the ceiling, as motionless as someone who feels she is being observed.

The sky was brighter, but the sun wasn’t yet piercing the clouds, and the light was as harsh as those electric lightbulbs with unfrosted glass. Hailstones drifted along the pavement.

The man came from the other end of the street, quite simply, quite naturally, like an ordinary passer-by. He was short and thin, dressed in grey, and even his face looked grey. He might have been old and well preserved; equally he could have been a young man who had aged prematurely.

His clothes were well cut, the overall effect not inelegant.

When he was only two or three houses away he looked up towards the window, and his eyes met Maigret’s. He made no gesture. His features didn’t move. Without pausing, he entered the

house opposite, and it was only on the stairs, or on the landing, that he froze, because two or three minutes passed before Maigret saw the woman turn towards the door.

She opened her mouth and must have said:

'Come in.'

She saw him before Maigret did, sat up on her bed, turned almost immediately towards the window and was clearly about to hurry over to close it.

The man spoke to her, walking towards her, set his hat down on a chair and remained calm and self-controlled as if reassuring an anxious child.

Without turning towards Maigret even once, he sat down on the edge of the bed, and Françoise Boursicault huddled against him with her head in the hollow of his shoulder, while he stroked her forehead with one hand.

From where she was sitting she could see the inspector, and he, embarrassed, stepped back and opened his bottle of beer and drank it from the neck, because he had forgotten to bring up a glass, and the tooth mug was an unappetizing colour.

He stepped out on to the landing. Mademoiselle Blanche was surprised to see him coming into her room – she thought, in fact, that he had no objections to seeing her in a state of undress – and particularly to see him talking for a long time about everything and nothing, about the book she was reading and the hail that had just fallen.

He heard the phone ring: Lucas answering downstairs and quick footsteps on the stairs.

'It's for you, chief … It's headquarters … They've found a clue …'

Lucas was equally surprised to find Maigret in the girl's bedroom; he was all the more surprised when Maigret received the news he brought him without surprise and without pleasure.

'She lived for a time on Rue des Dames, in a little furnished house, where a man who …'

'Is the Police Judiciaire still on the line?'

'Yes. I've got Lapointe, very excited. He wants to give you some details. He's checked with Records. He's sure …'

'Tell him I'll see him in my office straight away.'

In Lucas' stories these details assumed an almost epic quality.

'I could easily have imagined he was only interested in the pretty girl lying on her bed and putting on airs for his benefit, her dressing

gown more than half-open …'

Lucas had time to go back downstairs, to go and speak to Mademoiselle Clément in her kitchen. She too was becoming agitated and vaguely worried.

'What's he doing? What's going on?'

Maigret only left Mademoiselle Blanche's room when he had nothing more to see in the house opposite but a reclining woman whose face was turned towards him, and on whose cheeks he discerned the shining streaks of tears.

He took the trouble of going to say goodbye to Mademoiselle Clément, and she noticed the suitcase that he was holding.

'Are you going for good?'

'I'll come by and say hello.'

'Is your inquiry over? Did you find him?'

He didn't reply directly.

'Thank you for your care and your kindness.'

And, as he was looking around at the décor that had become so familiar to him, she started laughing, the throaty laugh that shook her big bosom.

'It's ridiculous! I'll miss you. I'd got used to you and already considered you as one of my tenants.'

Perhaps to please her, he murmured:

'Me too …'

Then, to Lucas:

'I'll see you back at headquarters soon.'

Mademoiselle Clément followed him to the door, where she stood as he crossed the street. The little black car of the Préfecture was a little way down, two houses further away than the Auvergnat's bistro.

Maigret hesitated and approached the counter.

'Are you leaving?'

'One last white wine, yes.'

He drank it, after which it was the landlord's turn. The landlady came out of her kitchen and wanted to raise her glass as well. Like Mademoiselle Clément, she said:

'I'd got used to you …'

They watched him leave; the fat woman was still in her doorway. He opened the car door, put his suitcase in first and murmured:

'May I?'

Once he was settled on his seat, he finally said to the driver:

‘To the Quai!’

The little grey man was sitting beside him; politely, he took off his hat, which he held on his knees for the whole journey.

The two men didn’t exchange a word.

9.

In which young Lapointe begins to be less proud of his file

The two men slowly climbed the dusty stairs, whose familiar smell Maigret was pleased to sniff. As always, people were waiting in the glazed waiting room. Joseph, the old office clerk, cheerfully called:

'Hello, sir!'

'Hello, Joseph!'

'The chief would like you to call in and see him.'

'I'll go there in a moment.'

'Monsieur Lapointe has also asked me to tell him as soon as you get back.'

'I know.'

'Monsieur Torrence phoned.'

'Thanks, Joseph.'

He was returning very gently into the everyday routine. As he opened his office door, it seemed to be reproaching him for his desertion.

'Come in!'

He opened the window and took off his hat and his raincoat.

'Make yourself comfortable. Sit down.'

Suddenly the internal telephone rang. It was Lapointe.

'I have his name and the whole story, chief. Do you want me to come and see you with the file?'

'In a little while. I'll call you.'

Poor Lapointe! He said with a piqued smile:

'Fine!'

In front of him, the man was sitting on a chair, lifting the leg of his trouser so as not to break the crease. He was plainly very concerned with his appearance. He was clean shaven. His fingernails were neat. His expression was one of extreme fatigue.

‘Have you lived in the colonies?’

‘How can you tell?’

It was hard to say exactly. It was something indefinable. Something in his complexion, in his expression, in that kind of premature ageing, because Maigret was now sure that the man before him was barely more than forty-five.

‘You’re younger than her, aren’t you?’

There were two of them sitting talking in an office, and they looked as if they were calmly talking business, as if, in a few moments, one of the two was not about to stop being a man like any other.

‘Do you smoke?’

‘No, thank you. I haven’t smoked for years.’

‘And you don’t drink either?’

They were getting to know each other gradually, with furtive glances that didn’t yet settle.

‘I don’t drink any more, no.’

‘Did you drink a lot?’

‘Once upon a time.’

‘One of my inspectors is waiting to bring me your file.’

Strangely, the man didn’t imagine for an instant that he was bluffing. He said simply:

‘It was bound to happen sooner or later.’

‘Did you expect it?’

‘I knew it was inevitable.’

‘You’re almost relieved? Aren’t you?’

‘Perhaps. As long as she isn’t mixed up in the case. It’s not her fault. Don’t forget your promise to me.’

It was the only moment when he showed any apprehension. He was calm; one might even have said that as their conversation was played out in the peace of the office he relaxed some more, as a man who hadn’t been able to do so for years.

‘As for me, I’ve decided to pay the price.’

He added with a shy smile:

‘I suppose it’s going to be a high one?’

‘Probably, yes.’

‘My head?’

Maigret gestured vaguely.

‘It’s hard to predict how juries are going to react. You might not pay such a high price if …’

The man said in a clear voice, with a hint of anger:

'No!'

'It's your business. How old were you when you met her?'

'Twenty. I had just been through the recruiting board and declared unfit.'

'Born in Paris?'

'In the Nièvre.'

'Parents well to do?'

'Middle class. Quite poor.'

'Did you study?'

'Three years of middle school.'

Around the same age as Paulus. He too had come to Paris with the idea of making a career for himself.

'Did you work?'

'I've worked.'

'At what?'

'In offices … I was badly paid …'

Like Paulus, again.

'And you started frequenting bars?'

'I was alone in Paris. I hated being in my room.'

'And you met Françoise in a bar?'

'Yes. She was four years older than me.'

'She had a lover?'

'Yes.'

'And she left him because of you?'

'Yes.'

'You set up home together?'

'I couldn't, because I had no money. I'd just left my job. I was looking for another one.'

'Did you love her?'

'I thought so. But I didn't know yet.'

He had uttered those words seriously, slowly, staring at the floor.

'Would you rather I asked for the file?'

'It's not worth it. My name was Julien Foucrier. Françoise's last boyfriend had money to burn. I was furious not to be able to give her anything.'

'Did she complain?'

'No. She said we had our whole lives ahead of us, and I would get there eventually.'

'You lacked patience?'

‘Exactly.’

‘Who did you kill?’

‘I didn’t plan to kill anyone. Opposite where I lived, on Rue des Dames, behind Boulevard des Batignoles, there was a man in his sixties that the owner of the house had told me about.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I was always late with my rent. She told me he lent money to people in my situation, and that I would be better off owing it to him than to her. I went to see him. He lent to me twice, at one hundred per cent interest. He lived alone in a dark flat, where he did his own housework. His name was Mabille.’

Maigret didn’t tell him that he vaguely remembered the case.

‘Did you kill him?’

‘Yes. I went to see him a third time to ask him for a new loan, and he opened the safe. There were two candelabras on the mantelpiece. I grabbed one of them.’

‘Then what did you do?’

‘The police wasted nearly a month. In fact, just after my visit, someone else went up to see Mabille, a man with a criminal record, and it was his description that the concierge gave. He was arrested. For a long time they thought he was the guilty man.’

‘Did you tell Françoise the truth?’

‘I was living in a trance. When I read in the papers that they’d released the man arrested in my place I lost my head and crossed the border.’

‘Still without saying anything to Françoise?’

‘I wrote to tell her that my family needed to see me, and that I would be back soon.’

‘Where did you go?’

‘To Spain. Then to Portugal, from where I set sail for Panama. The French papers published my name and my description. In Portugal I managed to get hold of a passport in the name of Vermersch.’

‘And you’ve lived under that name since then?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you stay in Panama for a long time?’

‘Eighteen years.’

‘You heard nothing from Françoise?’

‘How would I have heard from her?’

‘You didn’t write to her?’

‘Never. At first I worked as a waiter in a French hotel. Then I set up my own restaurant.’

‘Was it successful?’

He answered, almost modestly:

‘I made some money. Enough to live comfortably. I fell ill. My liver. I was drinking a lot. Over there they sell real absinthe quite freely. I’d developed a taste for it. I spent three months in hospital, and the doctors recommended a change of climate.’

‘How long ago did you come back to France?’

‘Seven years.’

‘So, before Françoise fell ill in turn.’

‘Yes. Two years before.’

‘How did you find her?’

‘I wasn’t looking for her. I wouldn’t have dared. I was sure she would refuse to see me. I just met her on the Métro by chance one day.’

‘Where were you living?’

‘Where I’m still living, on Boulevard Richard-Lenoir.’

It was his second smile; if you could call it a smile.

‘A few blocks away from you, on the corner of Rue du Chemin-Vert.’

‘Françoise told you she was married?’

‘That’s right.’

‘She wasn’t angry with you?’

‘No. She considered herself responsible for what had happened.’

‘Did she still love you?’

‘I think so.’

‘What about you?’

‘I’d never stopped loving her?’

He didn’t raise his voice, he spoke very simply, in a neutral tone, and the sun was starting to pierce the clouds, still young and humid.

‘You didn’t ask her to leave her husband?’

‘She didn’t think she had the right. You see, he’s a very good man, and she respects him.’

‘We met up two or three times a week when her husband was at sea, in a café on Boulevard Sébastopol. I was the one who wanted to know where she lived. Not for the reason you imagine. We didn’t think about it. One day I went into the house when the concierge was shopping and I left almost immediately.’

‘Did it become a habit?’

‘It happened several times.’

‘Had you already agreed on the signal?’

‘The copper pot! Yes. I knew I’d get caught sooner or later. It was inevitable.’

‘You never suggested that she follow you abroad?’

‘She wouldn’t have agreed.’

‘Because of Boursicault?’

‘Yes. You don’t know him.’

‘Then she became an invalid?’

‘A little while afterwards. You’ve seen her. That’s the worst thing that could have happened to us. She couldn’t go out. I went to her place more often. One morning, when the concierge came back, I was still in the flat and I hid. I stayed there until the next day.’

‘And from then on you started again?’

‘Yes. It somehow made us feel as if we were a household. Don’t forget that we had never lived together. When I was living on Rue des Dames, she had kept her room on Boulevard Rochechouart. That’s why nobody’s ever talked about her. That’s the story! I started staying for two days, then three, sometimes more. We ended up organizing ourselves, because there was the question of food. I brought mine with me.’

‘Obviously there was no danger of her husband coming home unexpectedly, given that the boats stuck to a strict timetable.’

‘It was hardest during his month’s leave.’

It was all grey, melancholy, like the man himself, like the lodgings on Rue Lhomond, like the woman who spent her days lying in her bed.

‘Last week I saw through the window that the street was under surveillance.’

‘Did you think it was because of you?’

‘The papers hadn’t mentioned Paulus. I couldn’t have suspected that it was the house opposite that the police were interested in. I thought quite naturally that they’d tracked me down. They probably weren’t sure, or did they think I was outside and they were waiting for me to come back? For two days I imagined all kinds of things. Ten times I was about to give myself up, but I would have had to talk about Françoise, and they would have questioned her, perhaps arrested her, and her husband would have found out …’

‘In short,’ Maigret said, stuffing a cold pipe, ‘you shot the inspector so that you could leave the house.’

‘Yes.’

‘Because the husband was going to come back and find you there.’

‘That’s it. For three days I waited in vain for a gap in the surveillance. I saw the inspectors taking over from one another. When they moved in to Mademoiselle Clément’s house, I was sure that it was to spy on the flat where I was. I waited until the last minute, so to speak. Boursicault was on the train. He would arrive just after midnight. I absolutely had to get out, do you understand?’

‘Were you armed?’

‘I’ve never been armed in my life, not even in Panama. I knew that Boursicault’s revolver was in the bedside table. I’d seen it there often. It was a big Colt that he had kept from the first war, and which he left within his wife’s reach because he thought she was fearful.’

‘Did you fire from the window?’

‘I waited for the inspector to light a cigarette, as he did every few minutes, so that I could get a better aim.’

‘Did Françoise know what you were doing?’

‘No. She didn’t even see that I was holding the gun in my hand, because we were in darkness.’

‘Were you careful not to leave straight away?’

‘I waited until there were enough people around outside to pass unnoticed. When I left the house, the concierge was on the pavement opposite, with the neighbours, her back towards me. She had left the door open.’

‘Françoise wasn’t unaware that it was you who had fired?’

‘How could she have been unaware? I promised her I would get across the border.’

‘When did you call her?’

‘The next day. She begged me to leave again.’

‘Why didn’t you?’

He didn’t reply. Then he murmured, looking up at Maigret:

‘What would have been the point?’

A bit like Paulus, who had clung on to Mademoiselle Clément’s house? He had left once and come back.

‘Did you know you’d be caught?’

He shrugged.

‘Don’t you care?’

‘As long as she wasn’t worried. She has nothing to do with it. She had nothing to do with Rue des Dames either. It’s my fault and mine alone. It was a piece of bad luck.’

That idiot Paulus, in his cell, must have been thinking the same thing.

‘Now I regret shooting the inspector. I was relieved when I read in the papers that he wasn’t dead. Particularly when I found out that he had two children, and that his wife was expecting a third.’

They said nothing for a moment, and a ray of sunlight settled on the window, wiped away almost immediately by a cloud.

‘Don’t forget you promised me …’

Maigret frowned as he remembered the lawyer that Françoise Boursicault had called, reached for the phone and then changed his mind.

‘Did she tell you she’d called a lawyer?’

‘Yes. She won’t tell him anything.’

Maigret picked up the receiver anyway.

‘Put me through to the Brasserie Dauphine … Hello …! Justin …? Maigret here …’

And, to his interlocutor:

‘A beer?’

‘A cup of coffee.’

‘Bring me two beers and a cup of coffee.’

He got to his feet and went and stood by the window. The bell rang.

‘Yes, chief. In a moment …’

He turned towards the man, who was still obediently sitting in his chair.

‘Do you know a lawyer?’

‘I’ll take the first one who comes along. From where I am right now …’

Maigret started smoking and, a few moments later, opened the door to the waiter from the brasserie and had him set the tray down on his desk.

He downed his first beer in one go and wiped his mouth.

‘I imagine I can leave you alone for a moment?’

‘You can.’

He went to see the chief.

‘They tell me the case is solved, Maigret?’

‘It is. The man is in my office.’

‘He’s confessed?’

‘He’s confessed. He crept into the house opposite Mademoiselle Clément’s to burgle it, and when, on leaving, he saw there was an inspector in the street …’

‘Is that true?’

‘No. But I’m going to act as if it were.’

‘A woman?’

‘Yes?’

‘Pretty?’

‘No. She must be fifty, and she’s been an invalid for five years.’

‘Is there going to be a fuss?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Well, Maigret, I’d like you to receive someone who’s been in the waiting room for three days, and whose morale is at rock bottom.’

‘Who?’

‘Paulus’ father. He’s desperate to see you, and explain …’

‘I’ll see him,’ Maigret sighed. ‘How is Janvier?’

‘They took him home this morning. Your wife?’

‘She’s coming back tonight. I’ll pick her up from the station.’

He passed by the inspectors’ office, where young Lapointe, very animated, leaped to his feet and handed him a thick file.

‘A stroke of luck, chief! We’ve found …’

‘I know, son. You’ve done a good job.’

He took the file under his arm as if it was of no importance.

‘You know he’s killed before?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is it true that you’ve arrested him? Lucas says …’

Maigret stood in the doorway, his pipe between his teeth, and Lapointe wasn’t sure he had understood what he muttered as he left.

‘Had to happen!’

He turned towards Vacher, who was there too, busy writing a report.

‘What did he say?’

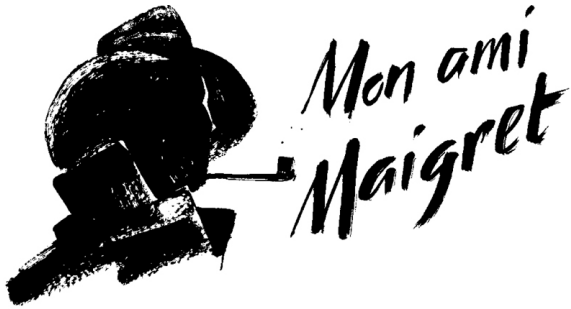
‘That it had to happen.’

‘What had to happen?’

‘Him being arrested, I suppose.’

And young Lapointe, staring at the door through which Maigret had disappeared, said simply:

‘Ah!’


Mon ami
Maigret

GEORGES
SIMENON
Maigret and
the Tall Woman
INSPECTOR MAIGRET

1.

Where Maigret meets an old acquaintance who has settled down in her own way, and the story of Sad Freddie and a possible corpse

Maigret read the docket that the office clerk had had the visitor fill out and handed to him:

> Ernestine, aka 'La Grande Perche' (née Micou, now Jussiaume), the tall woman you arrested seventeen years ago in Rue de la Lune, and who stripped b— naked just to taunt you, requests the honour of speaking to you urgently about a matter of the utmost importance.

Maigret cast a sidelong glance at old Joseph to check whether he had read the note, but the white-haired clerk was giving nothing away. He was probably the only person in the offices of the Police Judiciaire that morning who was not in shirt-sleeves, and for the first time in all these years the inspector asked himself what bizarre regulation compelled this venerable old man to wear a heavy chain with an enormous medallion around his neck.

There are days like that, when you ask yourself silly questions. Maybe it was the late-summer heat; maybe it was the holiday atmosphere, which stopped you taking anything seriously. The windows were wide open, and the rumble of Paris vibrated in the office, where, before Joseph had turned up, Maigret had been busy following a wasp with his eyes as it flew round and round and crashed into the ceiling at exactly the same spot each time. A good half of the Police Judiciaire was at the seaside or in the country. Lucas was sporting a panama hat which, on him, looked like a native's hut or a lampshade. The commissioner had headed off the day before to the Pyrenees, as he did every year.

'Is she drunk?' Maigret asked the clerk.

'I don't think so, sir.'

Because there are women who, after a few too many drinks, like to go and make disclosures to the police.

'Nervous?'

‘She asked if it would take long, and I replied that I wasn’t even sure if you would see her. She sat down in a corner of the waiting room and started reading the newspaper.’

Maigret couldn’t remember the name Micou, or Jussiaume, or the ‘Grande Perche’ nickname, but he had a clear recollection of Rue de la Lune on a hot day like today, when the bitumen feels soft under the soles of your shoes and Paris is impregnated with the stink of tar.

A little street down by Porte Saint-Denis, full of shady hotels and shops selling pastries and waffles. He wasn’t a detective chief inspector at the time. The women wore flapper dresses and had their hair shaved at the neck. Looking for information on the girl, he had gone into two or three of the local bars and might have drunk the odd Pernod or two. He could almost smell them again, along with the whiff of armpits and feet that pervaded the tiny hotel. The room was on the third or fourth floor. He had gone to the wrong door at first, and had come face to face with a black man, sitting on his bed playing the accordion, probably a musician in a dance hall. Unperturbed, the man had indicated the room next door with a jerk of his chin.

‘Come in!’

A husky voice. The voice of someone who had drunk and smoked too much. Then, by the window looking out on the courtyard well, a tall young woman in a blue dressing gown frying a chop on a spirit stove.

She was as tall as Maigret, perhaps taller. She scrutinized him from head to toe with no flicker of emotion, then said straight away:

‘You a cop?’

He found the wallet and the banknotes on top of the mirror-fronted wardrobe, and she didn’t flinch.

‘My girlfriend did it.’

‘Which girlfriend?’

‘I don’t know her name. We call her Lulu.’

‘Where is she?’

‘Find her. That’s your job.’

‘Get dressed and come with me.’

It was a petty case of a whore stealing from a client, but at Quai des Orfèvres it was a matter of some importance, not so much because of the money involved, though it was a tidy sum, but

because the victim was a major cattle dealer from Charente who had already got his parliamentary deputy involved.

'Are you going to let me eat my chop first?'

The tiny room had only one chair in it. He remained standing while the girl ate, taking her time, paying no attention to him, as if he simply didn't exist.

She must have been about twenty at the time. She was pale, with colourless eyes and a long, bony face. He could see her now, picking her teeth with a matchstick and pouring boiling water into her coffee-pot.

'I asked you to get dressed.'

It was hot, and the smell of the hotel was bothering him. Had she sensed his unease?

Calmly, she took off her dressing gown, her slip and her underwear and, naked as the day she was born, stretched out on the bed and lit a cigarette.

'I'm waiting!' he said impatiently, forcing himself to look the other way.

'Me too.'

'I have an arrest warrant.'

'So arrest me, then.'

'Get dressed and come with me.'

'I'm fine as I am.'

It was a ridiculous situation. She was calm, passive, with just a glint of irony in those colourless eyes.

'You said you were arresting me. That's fine by me. But don't ask me to give you a hand. This is my place. I'm hot and I'm allowed to be naked if I want. So if you insist that I come with you just as I am, I have no problem with that.'

He repeated himself at least ten times:

'Get dressed.'

And perhaps because of the paleness of her skin, perhaps because of the squalid décor, he thought that he had never seen a woman quite as naked as she was. He tried throwing her clothes on the bed, threatening her, then persuading her, all to no avail.

In the end he went downstairs to summon a couple of police officers, and the scene descended into farce. They had to forcibly wrap the girl up in a blanket and carry her, like a parcel, down the narrow stairs, while all the doors opened as they went past.

He had never seen her again after that. He had never even heard

her mentioned.

'Send her in,' he sighed.

He recognized her straight away. She didn't seem to have changed at all. The same long, pale face, the washed-out eyes, the wide, heavily lipsticked mouth that looked like an open wound. And in her expression he could see the cool irony of those who have seen so much that nothing seems terribly important to them any more. She was wearing a respectable dress, a light-coloured straw hat and a pair of gloves.

'Are you still annoyed with me?'

He sucked on his pipe and didn't reply.

'Can I sit down? I knew that you'd been promoted, which is why our paths never crossed again. Am I allowed to smoke?'

She took a cigarette from her bag and lit it.

'No hard feelings, but let me tell you straight away that back then I was in the right. I got sent down for a year, which I didn't deserve. There really was a Lulu, who you didn't bother to look for. We were together when we met that fat moneybags. He chose the both of us, but once he'd had a good look at me he told me to clear off because he didn't like skinny girls. I waited in the corridor, and then, an hour later, Lulu slipped me his wallet to stash away.'

'What happened to her?'

'She opened a small restaurant in the Midi about five years ago. I just wanted to show you that everyone makes mistakes now and then.'

'Is that why you came?'

'No. I came to tell you about Alfred. If he knew I was here he'd think I'm crazy. I could have gone to see Inspector Boissier, who knows him well.'

'Who is Alfred?'

'My husband. He really is my husband – we got married at the registry office and in church too, because he's still religious. Inspector Boissier arrested him a couple of times. One time, he got five years in Fresnes.

Her voice sounded almost rasping.

'The name Jussiaume maybe won't mean anything to you, but his nickname will ring a bell. It's often been mentioned in the papers. He's Sad Freddie.'

'The safe-cracker?'

'Yes.'

‘Have you had a fight?’

‘No. I’m not here for the reason you think. It’s not my style. So, you know who Alfred is now?’

Maigret had never seen him; more precisely, had only ever caught sight of him in the corridor when the burglar was waiting to be questioned by Boissier. He vaguely recalled a puny little man with darting eyes, wearing clothes that seemed two sizes too big for his scrawny body.

‘Of course, we don’t have the same opinion of him,’ she said. ‘He’s not got a lot going for him, but he’s more interesting than you imagine. I’ve been living with him for twelve years now and I’m starting to get to know him better.’

‘Where is he?’

‘I’m getting there, don’t worry. I don’t know where he is, but he’s managed to get himself into a right old mess, and that’s why I’m here. I need you to trust me, and I realize that’s asking a lot.’

He looked at her curiously; her plain speaking was somehow appealing. She wasn’t putting it on, wasn’t trying to impress him. She might have been struggling to get to the point, but that was because what she had to say was genuinely complicated.

Nevertheless, there was a major barrier between them, and it was this barrier she was trying to break down, so that he didn’t get the wrong idea.

Maigret had had very little to do with Sad Freddie personally and so knew no more about him than what he had heard around the office. He was something of a celebrity and had been rather romanticized by the newspapers because of his colourful exploits.

He had worked for safe-makers Planchart for many years and was one of their top experts. Even then he was a sad, dour character; his health was poor and he suffered periodic fits of epilepsy.

Boissier would probably be able to fill Maigret in on the circumstances of his leaving Planchart.

Whatever had happened, instead of installing safes, he had turned to breaking into them.

‘Was he still in full-time employment when you met him?’

‘Certainly not. It wasn’t me that led him astray, if that’s what you’re thinking. He did odd jobs, sometimes a bit of work for a locksmith, but I quickly cottoned on to what he was really up to.’

‘Are you sure you wouldn’t rather talk to Boissier?’

‘He takes care of burglaries, doesn’t he? You’re the one in charge

of murders.'

'Has Alfred killed someone?'

'Listen, inspector, I think we'll get there quicker if you just let me talk. Call Alfred what you like, but he wouldn't kill anyone for all the gold in the world. It may seem stupid to say this about a man like him, but he is a sensitive type who can cry at the drop of a hat. I should know. Some would say that he is soft. Maybe that's the reason why I fell in love with him.'

She looked at him calmly. She had said these last words without emphasis, but with a certain pride in her voice.

'If you knew everything that went on in his head you'd be amazed. But no matter. As far as you're concerned he's just a thief. He's been caught before and spent five years inside. I didn't miss a single visiting day and the whole time he was locked up I had to take up my old profession, at the risk of getting into trouble, because I wasn't registered, and you still needed to do that to work on the street in those days.

'He keeps hoping he'll pull off one big job, then we can go and live in the country. It's been his dream since he was little.'

'Where do you live?'

'Quai de Jemmapes, just opposite the Saint-Martin Lock. We have two rooms above a bar painted green. It's quite handy because of the telephone.'

'Is Alfred there right now?'

'No. I've already told you I don't know where he is. You just have to believe me. He pulled a job, not last night but the night before.'

'And he's run away?'

'Bear with me, inspector. You'll understand soon enough why what I have to tell you is important. You know those people who buy a lottery ticket for every draw, don't you? Some of them go without food in order to buy the ticket, in the belief that in a few days' time they'll be rich. Well, Alfred was like that. There are dozens of safes in Paris that he installed and knows like the back of his hand. Usually people buy safes to lock away money and jewellery.'

'He hopes he will hit the jackpot?'

'Exactly.'

She shrugged her shoulders, as if she were talking about some innocent childhood enthusiasm. Then she added:

'He's had no luck. Mostly he's found title deeds that are

impossible to sell or business documents. One time he did find a large sum of money, large enough to allow him to live in peace for the rest of his days, but that time Boissier arrested him.'

'Were you with him? Do you act as his lookout?'

'No. He didn't want that. In the beginning he'd tell me where he was doing the job, and I'd arrange it so that I was in the vicinity. When he realized, he didn't confide in me any more.'

'He's worried you might be caught?'

'Maybe. But probably for superstitious reasons as well. You see, even though we live together, he's essentially a lone wolf; he can go two days without saying a single word. When I see him go out in the evening with his bicycle, I know what he's up to.'

That was a detail that had stuck in Maigret's mind. Some newspapers had dubbed Alfred Jussiaume the 'burglar with the bike'.

'He has this idea that a man riding a bicycle at night will be inconspicuous, especially if he has a toolbox over his shoulder. People will think that he's on his way to work. You see that I'm talking to you as a friend here.'

Maigret again wondered what she had come to his office for. When she took out another cigarette, he offered her a light.

'Today's Thursday. The night of Tuesday to Wednesday, Alfred went out on a job.'

'Did he tell you what he was doing?'

'He's been going out at the same time for a few nights. That's usually a give-away. Before breaking into a house or an office, he sometimes spends a week watching the premises to get to know the habits of the people there.'

'And to make sure no one will be around?'

'No. That doesn't bother him. I think he even prefers to work when someone is about rather than when the place is empty. He can move around without making a sound. Loads of times he's slipped into bed next to me at night and I hadn't even noticed he'd come home.'

'Do you know where he was working the night before last?'

'I just know that it was somewhere in Neuilly. And I only discovered that by accident. The day before, when he got home, he told me that the police had asked to see his papers; they must have thought he was up to no good, because they stopped him at the Bois de Boulogne, near the spot where women go to pick up trade.

‘“Where was that?” I asked him.

‘“Behind the Botanical Garden. I was on my way back from Neuilly.”

‘So the night before last, when he went off with his tools, I realized that he was off on a job.’

‘Had he been drinking?’

‘He doesn’t drink or smoke. I wouldn’t allow it. He lives in fear of having a fit and he is always deeply ashamed when it happens to him in the middle of the street, with lots of people gathering round and feeling sorry for him. Before he left he told me:

‘“I think this one will be our ticket to the country.”’

Maigret had started taking notes, and surrounding them with doodles.

‘What time did he leave Quai de Jemmapes?’

‘Around eleven in the evening, like on the previous days.’

‘So he must have got to Neuilly at about midnight.’

‘Probably. He never cycles very fast. On the other hand, there’s not much traffic at that time of night.’

‘When did you see him again?’

‘I didn’t.’

‘And did you think something must have happened to him?’

‘He telephoned me.’

‘When?’

‘At five in the morning. I wasn’t asleep. I was worried. He always has this fear of having a fit in the street, but I always think it could happen while he is on a job, do you understand? I heard the telephone ring in the bar downstairs. Our room is directly above it. The bar owners didn’t get up, so I guessed it was for me and went down. I could tell from his voice that there had been a hitch. He was whispering:

‘“Is that you?”

‘“Yes.”

‘“Are you alone?”

‘“Yes. Where are you?”

‘“Next to Gare du Nord, in a little café.

‘“Listen, Tine” – he always calls me Tine – “I have to make myself scarce for a while.”

‘“Were you spotted?”

‘“That’s not it. I don’t know. A guy saw me, but I don’t think he was from the police.”

‘“Do you have the money?”

‘“No, it happened before I finished.”

‘“What happened?”

‘“I was working on the lock when my torch lit up a face in a corner of the room. I thought someone had come in without a sound and was looking at me. But then I noticed that the eyes were dead.”’

She observed Maigret.

‘I’m sure he wasn’t lying. If he had killed someone, he would have told me. I’m not spinning you a line. I could tell he was close to fainting at the other end of the phone. He is so afraid of death …’

‘Who was it?’

‘I don’t know. He didn’t give any detail. He seemed in a hurry to hang up. He was afraid of being overheard. He told me he was going to catch a train a quarter of an hour later …’

‘For Belgium?’

‘Probably, as he was next to Gare du Nord. I checked a timetable. There is a train at five forty-five.’

‘And you don’t know which café he was ringing from?’

‘I wandered round the area yesterday, asking questions, but drew a blank. They must have thought I was a jealous wife, because no one wanted to tell me anything.’

‘So basically all he told you was that there was a dead body in the room where he was working?’

‘I got a bit more out of him. He said it was a woman, and that her chest was covered with blood, and that she was holding a telephone receiver in her hand.’

‘Is that all?’

‘No. Just as he was about to get away – and I can just imagine the state he was in! – a car pulled up outside the gate—’

‘He actually said “gate”?’

‘Yes, I distinctly remember him using the word. It struck me. Someone got out and headed for the door. While the man came into the hallway, Alfred slipped out of the house through the window.’

‘And his tools?’

‘He left them behind. He had cut out a windowpane to get in. I’m sure of that, because that’s what he always does. I think he would do it even if the door was open, because he’s a bit of an obsessive, or maybe just superstitious.’

‘So he wasn’t seen?’

‘Yes, he was. When he ran across the garden.’

‘He mentioned a garden too?’

‘I’m not making this up. I’m saying that as he was running across the garden someone looked out of the window and shone an electric torch on him, probably Alfred’s own torch, which he hadn’t managed to pick up. He leaped on to his bike and rode off without turning round, right down to the Seine – I don’t know where exactly – and threw his bike into the river, in case it would help identify him. He didn’t dare come home. He made his way to Gare du Nord on foot and telephoned me and begged me to say nothing. I pleaded with him not to run away. I tried reasoning with him. In the end he promised to write to me poste restante to tell me where he was so that I could join him.’

‘Has he written yet?’

‘There hasn’t been enough time for a letter to arrive. I went to the post office this morning. I’ve been thinking about it for the last twenty-four hours. I bought all the newspapers, expecting to read a report about a murdered woman.’

Maigret picked up the phone and rang the police station at Neuilly.

‘Hello! Police Judiciaire here. Have you had any murder recorded in the last twenty-four hours?’

‘Just a moment. I will hand you over to the secretary. I’m just the orderly.’

Maigret made absolutely sure:

‘No bodies found on the public highway? No night calls? No bodies fished out of the Seine?’

‘Absolutely nothing, sir.’

‘No one reported a gunshot?’

‘No one.’

La Grande Perche waited patiently, like someone on a social visit, her hands joined and resting on her bag.

‘You understand why I came to see you?’

‘I think so.’

‘At first, I thought that perhaps the police had seen Alfred, in which case his bicycle alone would have given him away. Then there are the tools that he left behind. Now that he’s fled over the border no one will believe his story. And … he is no safer in Belgium or Holland than he is in Paris. I’d rather see him in prison for attempted burglary, even if it means he goes down for another

five years, than to see him accused of murder.'

'The problem is,' said Maigret, 'that there is no corpse.'

'You think he made it up, or that I made it up?'

He didn't reply.

'It will be easy for you to find the house where he did the job that night. Maybe I shouldn't tell you this, but I'm sure you will think of it yourself. It's almost certain the safe is one that he installed himself. Planchart surely have a list of their clients. There can't be many in Neuilly who bought a safe from them at least seventeen years ago.'

'Did Albert have any other girlfriends apart from you?'

'Ah! I should have seen that one coming. I'm not the jealous type, and even if I was I wouldn't be telling you lies just to get my revenge, if that's what you're thinking. He doesn't have a girlfriend because he doesn't want one, the poor man. If he did, I'd be able to fix him up with whatever he wanted.'

'Why?'

'Because he doesn't have much fun in his life.'

'Do you have any money?'

'No.'

'What will you do?'

'I'll get by, you know me. I'm only here to tell you that Freddie didn't kill anyone.'

'If he wrote to you, would you show me the letter?'

'You'll read it before me. Now that you know he said he'd write to me poste restante, you'll monitor all the post offices in Paris. You forget that I know how things work.'

She had stood up, very tall; she looked at him, sitting at his desk, from head to toe.

'If everything I've heard about you is true, there is a chance that you will believe me.'

'Why?'

'Because otherwise you'd be a fool. And you aren't. You're going to telephone Planchart.'

'Yes.'

'Will you keep me informed?'

He considered her without replying and realized that, despite himself, there was a smile of amusement playing about his lips.

'Please yourself, then,' she sighed. 'I could be of use to you. No matter how long you've been in this game, there are still things that

people like us know better than you.'

This 'us' obviously referred to a whole world of people, the one that La Grande Perche belonged to, living on the other side of the barrier.

'If Inspector Boissier wasn't on holiday, I'm sure he would back up everything I have told you about Alfred.'

'He isn't on holiday. He leaves tomorrow.'

She opened her bag and took out a piece of paper.

'I'll leave you the phone number of the bar downstairs from us. If you ever need to come and see me, I promise you I won't strip off. Nowadays I prefer to keep my dress on!'

There was just a slight hint of bitterness in her voice. But then, a moment later she was poking fun at herself:

'Much better for all concerned!'

It was only after he had closed the door behind her that Maigret realized that he had quite naturally shaken the hand that she had offered to him. The wasp was still buzzing round just below the ceiling, as if looking for a way out, completely oblivious of the wide-open windows. Madame Maigret had said this morning that she would be going to the flower market and asked him, if he was free around midday, to meet her there. It was midday. He hesitated, leaned out of the window, from where he saw the splashes of vivid colours behind the parapet of the embankment.

Then he picked up the phone with a sigh.

'Ask Boissier to come and see me.'

Seventeen years had elapsed since the farcical events of Rue de la Lune, and Maigret was now an important person at the head of the murder squad. A funny notion came into his head, an almost childish craving. He lifted the phone again.

'Brasserie Dauphine, please.'

At the exact moment that Boissier was coming through the door, he said:

'Send me up a Pernod, please.'

Then, seeing the inspector with large rings of sweat under the arms of his shirt, he added:

'Make that two. Two Pernods. Thank you.'

Boissier, a true southerner, who was from Provence, twitched his blue-black moustache with pleasure and went to sit on the window-sill, where he mopped his brow.

Pietr the Latvian
The Late Monsieur Gallet
The Hanged Man of Saint-Pholien
The Carter of *La Providence*
The Yellow Dog
Night at the Crossroads
A Crime in Holland
The Grand Banks Café
A Man's Head
The Dancer at the Gai-Moulin
The Two-Penny Bar
The Shadow Puppet
The Saint-Fiacre Affair
The Flemish House
The Madman of Bergerac
The Misty Harbour
Liberty Bar
Lock No. 1
Maigret

Cécile is Dead
The Cellars of the Majestic
The Judge's House
Signed, Picpus
Inspector Cadaver
Félicie
Maigret Gets Angry
Maigret in New York
Maigret's Holiday
Maigret and His Dead Man
Maigret's First Case
My Friend Maigret
Maigret at the Coroner's
Maigret and the Old Lady
Madame Maigret's Friend
Maigret's Memoirs
Maigret at Picratt's
Maigret Takes a Room
Maigret and the Tall Woman

THE BEGINNING

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